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Srimad RAMAYANA

BY
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THE PRINCE OF AYODHYA

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PREFACE

In the following pages a purely literary approach is made to the Ramayana, and a fairly comprehensive summary of its story is given for the benefit of the young. Though the poem consists of six kandas, (excluding the supplement, the so-called Uttara-kanda of doubtful authenticity) the story may, conveniently for our purposes, be divided into three parts. The first part, covering the Bala-kanda and the Ayodhya-kanda, is an intensely human tragedy full of situations which wring our hearts. The second part, covering the Aranya-kanda, the Kishkindha-kanda and the Sundara-kanda is a long romance which takes us into dense forests and distant lands inhabited by strange subhuman or inhuman beings possessing weird powers of changing their shape and size at will. And the third part, covering the Yuddha-kanda, is an epic describing a colossal conflict between two great Powers on earth,—a conflict in the issue of which all beings in the universe, including the high gods in heaven, were interested.

We do not know in what shape and form the story came to Valmiki's hands for fashioning his great poem. It is very probable that it came to him with a racial conflict, such as we find in parts of the Rig Veda, as its basis. But the poet has undoubtedly utilized it for a higher and nobler purpose. For him the conflict between Rama and Ravana is not so much between two races as between two civilizations, between two

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ways of life. The central purpose of his poem was perhaps to show that the true progress of humanity lies in its moral and spiritual evolution and not in its material and scientific development.

Man's real progress is internal, not external. Externally he may be crude, primitive and unscientific, and yet it is possible for him to make great moral progress. Some such lesson seems to be conveyed to us through characters like Guha, Hanuman, Jatayu and Jambavan in the Ramayana. For, externally, the civilization they represent is primitive and even subhuman. Guha is a backwoodsman, Hanuman is an ape, Jatayu is a vulture and Jambavan is a bear. Their bodies and their environment are apparently meant to emphasize this. The tail of Hanuman, the beak and talons of Jatayu and the shaggy skin of Jambavan are more or less symbolic. But these characters are depicted in the epic as advanced ethical beings capable of loyalty and friendship and heroic self-sacrifice. They are specially noted for their appreciation of the spiritual excellence shining through the characters of the hero and the heroine.

On the contrary, man may externally develop a highly scientific civilization, acquire immense wealth and power, erect palaces, construct aerial cars, drive chariots at tremendous speed and forge deadly weapons of war, and yet he may be morally and spiritually a very primitive being, given to drunkenness, greed, violence and sensuality. The Rakshasas in the Ramayana are, of course, examples of this kind of purely material progress. If the poet had not wanted to make the contrast between the two kinds of development explicit, he would not have emphasised at such length the splendour, the wealth and the technical efficiency of Lanka.

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For a comparison of the civilization of Lanka with that of Kishkindha as well as with that of Ayodhya, which is great both morally and materially, is inevitable for the readers of of Ramayana.

Apparently, the glorification of the splendour of Ravana's capital is largely Valmiki's own doing. He could not have found more than a hint or two for it in the traditional matter that came to him from the Vedic times. His artistic purpose in doing this is clear. He wanted to impress upon his readers or listeners that true progress was not material but moral progress, and that a people's civilization should be judged not by material standards but by spiritual standards.

In fact, Valmiki's message in part anticipates Gandhi's message to our own generation. According to Gandhi, a man may wear a rough hand-spun loin cloth, live in a small hut, travel in a country cart and eat only simple uncooked food, and yet he may be far more advanced morally and spiritually than a man travelling by aeroplane, driving a Rolls-Royce and listening through a radio set to the music of the Antipodes. Thus from Valmiki to Gandhi, the best minds of India have always taught the same lesson, viz., the superiority of moral and spiritual progress to material and scientific progress. They have taught it through epics, through discourses and through speeches and weekly articles as well as through the great example of their lives. They have partly fostered, and partly catered to, the natural instincts and inclinations of our people. So it may not be inappropriate, in this postwar period and on the eve of Indian Independence, to draw in an explicit manner the attention of our young men and women of all communities to the message of Valmiki contained in his great poem.

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In preparing this book for the press I was greatly helped by the valuable suggestions of my esteemed friends—Messrs. M. R. Rajagopala Aiyengar and K. Swaminathan to whom I render here my grateful thanks.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

We have great pleasure in presenting to our readers this second edition of Sri D. S. Sarma's book "The Prince of Ayodhya".

In this edition, the title of the book has been altered to "Srimad Ramayana, the story of the Prince of Ayodhya" to convey to the readers the import of the book even at a glance.

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SRIMAD RAMAYANA

THE STORY OF

THE PRINCE OF AYODHYA

PART I—A Tragedy

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE Ramayana gives us the adventures of Sri Rama, the Prince of Ayodhya, up to the time of his coronation as the King of Kosala. This great poem is by Valmiki. It has more than 20,000 verses and is divided into six kandas. The six kandas are—Bala Kanda, Ayodhya Kanda Aranya Kanda, Kishkindha Kanda, Sundara Kanda and Yuddha Kanda. It is usual to add a seventh Kanda called Uttara Kanda to this list. But many scholars are of opinion that it is not by Valmiki. The poet first tells us how he came to write the poem. One day, we are told, he happened to ask the divine sage Narada, who had come on a visit to his

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hermitage, whether there was any man on earth who was strong, handsome, learned, truthful, kind, virtuous, pious—in fact, perfect in every way,—so as to be a blessing to his country and an example to all. Narada replied that rarely indeed could all such good qualities be found in the same man. He, however, knew one man on earth who could answer to the poet's description. And that was Sri Rama, who with his peerless wife Sita was then ruling at Ayodhya. Hearing this, Valmiki was curious to know all about this ideal king and his peerless queen. Narada satisfied his curiosity by relating to him all the incidents of Rama's career and went away.

After Narada's departure, the poet, still turning in his mind all that he had heard, went to the wooded banks of the Tamasa, not far from the Ganges, to take his usual bath. There he saw on a tree two lovely birds, a pair of kraunchas, singing and making love to each other. Struck with the beauty of the scene the poet was listening to the notes of the birds, when suddenly a cruel fowler discharged an arrow from behind and brought down one of the birds. At the sight of blood and the heap of fluttering feathers on the ground, Valmiki was overwhelmed with pity, grief and anger, and cursed the man for his evil deed. The words that

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he uttered under the stress of emotion came out of his mouth in natural rhythm and measure. And, as he perceived how all unconsciously he had given vent to his feelings in the form of a regular verse, he heard an inner voice—the voice of the Creator—prompting him to use that metrical form and put into verse the whole story of Sri Rama which he had heard from Narada. If he should do so, the Voice assured him that " as long as the hills stand, and the rivers flow on this earth, so long would the story of the *Ramayana* be current in the world." With this assurance ringing in his ears, the poet sat down, meditated long and saw clearly with the eye of his mind history unroll itself exactly as Narada had told him. Then he composed the *Ramayana* and made two of his disciples get by heart the whole poem and sing it in the assemblies of men.

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CHAPTER II

DASARATHA, the aged king of Kosala, of the famous Ikshvaku line, having remained childless for long, performed with the help of the sage Rishyasringa a great sacrifice. The gods were pleased, and out of the sacrificial fire there arose a radiant being, their messenger, bearing in his hand a golden vessel containing celestial food. "Give this to your wives," said he to the king, "and your wishes will be fulfilled." The king received the gift of the gods joyfully and divided it among his three queens. He gave half of it to his chief queen Kausalya, one fourth to Sumitra, one eighth to Kaikeyi and the remainder again to Sumitra. The queens who thus partook of the celestial food conceived and brought forth in time four god-like sons. Rama was the eldest of them. He was the son of Kausalya. The other three were Bharata, the son of Kaikeyi, and Lakshmana and Satrughna, the sons of Sumitra. Though they were the sons of three different mothers, they were equally dear to each of the queens. For they were god-like in character as well as appearance, and perfect love, concord and happiness reigned in the king's household.

When the children grew up, they were taught all the arts of peace and war known to the world in

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those days. Rama became an adept in all of them. But he was a greater adept in truth and righteousness, in gentleness and compassion. No wonder he was the darling not only of his father and mother but also of the people of Ayodhya, the capital of Kosala. Even as a boy he was known to all as the embodiment of Dharma. He was loved and cherished by his parents, loved and followed by his brothers and loved and respected by all the people in the kingdom. When he was barely fifteen years of age, the renowned sage Visvamitra, from whose eye, it was said, nothing in the three worlds remained hidden, came to the court of Dasaratha and asked the king to send Rama with him to his hermitage in the forest as a protection against the Rakshasas, the followers of Ravana, who would come in hordes to pollute his sacrificial altars. It was then that Rama heard for the first time the name of his great adversary, to vanquish whom he had come into this world—the dreaded Ravana, the king of Lanka, an island somewhere far away in the southern seas from which ghastly stories reached the ears of men and made them shudder. For Ravana, the King of the Rakshasas, a monster of violence and cruelty, was the source of all those unholy assaults on the forest settlements, where sages performed *tapas* for the benefit of mankind.

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It was the duty of the king in those days to protect the hermitages of the Rishis. So Dasaratha promised to give every kind of help to Visvamitra, while pleading he could not send his son, a boy barely fifteen years of age, against so formidable a foe. But Visvamitra knew better. And as he insisted on his request being granted and as Vasishta, the chief priest of Ayodhya, advised the King accordingly, Dasaratha was forced to yield and part with his beloved son for a time.

On this heroic journey, which Rama had to undertake with the sage Visvamitra, he was accompanied by his brother, Lakshmana. Their first adventure in the forest was with Tataka, a she-demon, the mother of the wily Maricha, of whom we shall hear more hereafter. She had been at first a beautiful Yakshi, but was later changed into a hideous Rakshasi by the curse of the sage Agastya. She and her son used to harry and lay waste the land for miles around them and were a terror to the people. So Visvamitra asked Rama to kill the monster and free the fertile tract from the blight that had fallen on it. Rama had scruples at first to kill a woman, though she was a cruel monster. But he had been instructed by his father before leaving Ayodhya that he should in all things implicitly obey Visvamitra. Also he had no choice, for in the fight

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that followed Tataka rushed on the two brothers almost burying them under a rain of stones which she caused by the power of her magic. There was a violent struggle between the princes and the monster, till at last Rama's dart freed her soul from her hideous body. The gods in heaven rejoiced at her fall and suggested to Visvamitra, as only gods could do, to endow the victorious youth with all the spiritual weapons with which sages are wont to overcome evil in the world. The sage accordingly initiated Rama and taught him all the necessary mantras, by meditating on which the prince afterwards became unassailable and carried out the mission of his life.

They reached the hermitage at last. It was called Siddhasrama. Visvamitra gave the princes an account of its past history, describing how it originally belonged to the sage Kasyapa and how afterwards his famous son Vamana, the conqueror of Bali, lived in it and performed tapas. It was now Visvamitra's abode, where during sacrifices he was molested by the Rakshasas. Now that Rama and Lakshmana were there to guard the place, Visvamitra took a vow of silence and began an elaborate sacrifice. Six days and nights passed without any incident. But on the seventh day, when the rite reached its climax, a terrible noise

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was heard, and soon the sacred place was strewn with filth and gore. It was the work again of those wicked demons—Maricha and Subahu—against whom Visvamitra had sought the help of Rama. They had done such foul things before, times without number, and unfortunately the sage had always been powerless against them, for in the middle of a sacred rite he could not give way to anger and pronounce a curse on his foes. But this time Rama was there to protect the holy ground against any sacrilege. Rama now put his new spiritual weapons to the test. With one of them he hurled Maricha miles away and flung him into the sea, and with others he slew Subahu and all his grisly followers. The hermitage was thus cleared of its foes and purified. The sacrifice was completed and the sages rejoiced and blessed the young hero.

On the morrow, when Rama and Lakshmana again reported themselves for duty to Visvamitra, they were informed that all the sages of the hermitage were going to Mithila, the capital of that famous king and philosopher, Janaka, to witness a great sacrifice. The princes were asked whether they would go with them and see the far-famed bow in the possession of the king—a bow which had come to him from the greatest of the gods and which no mortal could bend. The curiosity of the

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princes was roused and they consented to go with the sages to the court of Janaka, little knowing what good fortune was in store for them there. Their path lay through many a valley, forest and hermitage. They went by stages from place to place on foot, resting under the shades of trees whenever they were tired. And Visvamitra beguiled the way by narrating to the young princes many an old legend about ancient heroes. He narrated to them the stories of King Sagara and his sons who dug up the earth and brought the ocean into existence, of Bhagiratha who made the celestial Ganges come down into this world, of the churning of the ocean of milk by the gods and demons, and of the drinking of the poison that grew out of it by the great god Siva, and many other tales. At last they reached the outskirts of Mithila and there the princes saw what looked like a fine old hermitage, but absolutely devoid now of any human beings. They enquired of Visvamitra what it was, and he told them that countless years ago a great sage called Gautama had lived there with his beautiful and high-souled wife, Ahalya. But Ahalya, sorely tempted by a god, sinned against the marriage law and was cursed by her husband and ordered to expiate her sin by lying invisible in the dust of the hermitage for many and

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many a year till Rama, the son of Dasaratha, should come and set her free. Rama listened eagerly to this touching story, and scarcely had he set his foot on the holy ground of the hermitage when Ahalya leapt into life and was seen by all—more radiant and beautiful than before on account of her long and continuous penance. The two princes at once bowed and reverently touched her feet. She now received them into her hermitage. And at the same moment Gautama also, who had retired to the Himalayas after the fall of his wife, knowing that the curse he had laid on her was at an end, appeared on the scene and joined Ahalya in welcoming Rama.

After resting a while in Gautama's hermitage the party started again, went a little to the north-east and reached at last the sacrificial halls of Janaka, the king of Videha. Visvamitra was eagerly welcomed by the king, and he introduced the sons of Dasaratha to him narrating their adventures on the way and told him of their curiosity to see the mighty bow in his possession. Among those who listened to the account given by Visvamitra was Satananda, the son of Gautama and Ahalya. He was greatly pleased to hear of the reunion of his father and mother and narrated to the princes in his turn the achievements of Visva-

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mitra in whose company they had come to the court of Janaka. He described to them in detail how Visvamitra, though he was originally a powerful king and a man of violent passions, succeeded at last by his prolonged austerities in being recognised as a Rishi of the highest order. The princes listened to this account with admiring interest and retired for the night along with Visvamitra.

On the next day, when Janaka came to visit his guests, Visvamitra asked him to show to the princes the famous bow he had in his possession. The king then narrated the story of that divine bow—how it was originally given to one of his ancestors by the great god Siva himself and how it had come down from father to son in the royal family as a precious heirloom. The princes listened with great attention to the story narrated by the king, who at the end of it said something which at once sent a thrill through the heart of Rama. " Ploughing a field ", said Janaka, " for preparing a sacrificial altar, some years ago, I saw a lovely damsel spring up from the furrow like a goddess. I took her home and brought her up as my own daughter and gave her the name of Sita. Born not of the flesh but of the spirit was she. Therefore I resolved that she should be given in marriage

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only to a hero of spiritual prowess. And, as this sacred bow of Siva could be lifted and used only through the strength of the spirit and not through the strength of the arm, I proclaimed that any prince who could wield it would gain the hand of my immaculate daughter. Many a prince, O Visvamitra, has come to my court and tried and met with bitter disappointment. Let Rama, the son of Dasaratha, try if he wants to."

So said the king, and Visvamitra from whose eye nothing in the three worlds remained hidden, knowing the spiritual prowess of his pupil asked Janaka to let the prince see the bow. The king then gave the necessary orders. The bow which had been kept in a huge iron box mounted on four pairs of wheels was dragged into the hall by a band of stalwart men. Rama then modestly stepped up, and with the permission of Janaka and Visvamitra opened the box and lifted the bow. The crowds of people that had assembled could scarcely believe their eyes. The prince now put forth his spirit and pulled the string, when lo! the famous bow snapped in two in his hands as with a thunder-clap. The people were stunned. And Janaka cried, " I see the wonderful might of the Prince of Ayodhya, O Visvamitra. My daughter Sita will be blessed in having such a prince for her husband. And my

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vow that I should give her in marriage only to a hero of spiritual prowess is fulfilled."

The arrangements for the marriage were quickly made. Dasaratha was sent for, and he gladly gave his consent and came to Mithila with all his retinue. Janaka invited all his relatives and friends and the kings of the neighbouring countries. The ceremony was, however, simple. On the appointed day at the auspicious hour fixed by the astrologers of the court the king conducted his daughter, who was dressed for the marriage, near the sacred fire. He made her stand near the bridegroom and said, "This is Sita, my daughter. She will be your partner in Dharma. Receive her, take her by the hand. I wish you happiness. Happy in her devotion to you, she shall ever follow you even as your shadow." After the wedding festivities were over, Visvamitra blessed the prince and the princess and retired to the Himalayas, and Dasaratha started for his capital.

An interesting incident happened to the marriage party on their way to Ayodhya. They were suddenly met by Parasurama, who, though he was a Brahmana, had relentlessly carried on a blood-feud against the Kshatriyas, one of whose clans had murdered his father. Parasurama was a man of iron will and he wielded a mighty battle-axe. Once

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at the bidding of his father he had not hesitated to cut off his mother's head. And when he was asked what boon he wanted as a prize for his unqualified obedience he as unhesitatingly said that his mother should live again, and so she did. On seeing this implacable enemy of the Kshatriya class, which, it was said, he had destroyed twenty-one times, the old Dasaratha lost his wits and began to mumble a prayer to him to spare his beloved son. But the man of iron contemptuously brushed aside the old man and addressed the young prince and challenged him to bend the bow which he had in his possession. He said he had heard of Rama's exploit in bending the bow of Siva at Janaka's court and asked the prince whether he could similarly bend that other bow, which was Vishnu's bow and which had come from father to son in his own family. If Rama could, he would prove himself worthy of fighting a duel with another Rama—the Rama with a *parasu* or a battle-axe. Rama, the son of Dasaratha, quietly accepted the challenge, seized the bow which was in his adversary's hand and fixing an arrow on its string said he could easily discharge it and kill Parasurama. The latter, in handing over the bow to the prince, seemed to have handed over his strength also, for he now became limp and begged for peace and said, " I see you are

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an extraordinary man, O Prince, whose career on earth the gods in heaven will eagerly watch and follow. Else you could not have performed this feat of bending my bow." Saying these words Parasurama took leave of Rama and retired to the Himalayas, deprived of all his powers of violence. Dasaratha did not hear the farewell speech of Parasurama for he was in a stupor caused by the excessive fear of the great enemy of the Kshatriyas. Rama now gently roused his father, saying that the deadly foe had gone. The King then came to himself, and the party continued their journey and reached Ayodhya, where an enthusiastic welcome was awaiting them from the citizens and the royal household.

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CHAPTER III

FOR twelve years the young prince and princess lived a happy life in a palace of their own in Ayodhya. Rama's character was recognized by all to be the very embodiment of Dharma. But Sita's was still a rose bud, whose delicate perfume was confined within itself. It was later that her marvellous qualities unfolded themselves in very romantic and tragic circumstances—qualities which have enshrined her forever in the hearts of all Hindus.

In an evil moment, as it turned out to be, the old King Dasaratha wanted to crown Rama as his heir to the kingdom and entrust to him the affairs of the State. He obtained the consent of his ministers and subjects and fixed a day for the coronation. There were rejoicings in the palace, in the capital and in all towns and villages of Kosala in anticipation of the happy event.

But evil entered into the heart of a deformed woman called Manthara. She was the waiting-maid of Queen Kaikeyi, the mother of Prince Bharata. She did not like the rejoicings in the palace. She hated the idea of Queen Kausalya coming into power after the installation of her son. Her own mistress was now in power as the beloved queen of King Dasaratha. If only Bharata could

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be installed, instead of Rama, as the next in succession to the kingdom, her mistress would continue to be in power and her own influence would remain what it was. But she saw two difficulties in her way. One was Bharata's love and loyalty to his elder brother Rama. He would not certainly countenance any intrigue of this kind. And secondly there was Kaikeyi's own love for Rama. She made no distinction between the brothers. Rama's getting the throne was in her eyes as good as Bharata's getting it. The evil-minded Manthara pondered deeply over the situation. Fortunately for her, Bharata was away on a visit to his maternal uncle's court. If his succession was somehow settled in his absence and a decision reached in Ayodhya before he returned home, he might fret and fume for a time, but would ultimately acquiesce in the decision of the king. So there was only Kaikeyi to deal with for the present. Her love for Rama was undeniable. But could not Manthara work upon her fears, her vanity and her jealousy? She made up her mind to try.

So the maid went to the mistress and began the assault on her heart. Thrice she attempted and thrice she failed. The love which Kaikeyi bore to Rama was so strong. But the poison which Manthara put into her mind began to work slowly. The

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maid cleverly pointed out how Dasaratha had taken advantage of Bharata's absence and suddenly brought forward his proposal of crowning Rama. He knew they were rivals. He wanted to secure the throne for Rama while Bharata was away. Dasaratha was not to be trusted. He always professed love to Kaikeyi, but did he inform her of his proposal to crown Kausalya's son in preference to her own? The days of her ascendancy were over. The moment Rama was crowned Kausalya would regain power and take revenge on Kaikeyi who had superseded her in Dasaratha's affection and treated her with arrogant disdain. In fact, Kaikeyi was going to become the slave of Kausalya. And what about Bharata, her son? His position would be worse. As long as he lived Rama would see in him a rival to the throne. He had better not come back to Ayodhya. Kaikeyi would do well to send word to him immediately never to return home, but to fly away to some distant place where Rama's emissaries might not reach him. Certainly Bharata's life was in danger and yet his stupid mother was rejoicing in his enemy's victory.

Taunted by these words the queen sprang from her couch resolved to protect her dear son and her own honour. She would not be superseded at the court, nor would she tolerate the idea of her son

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being an exile from Ayodhya. There was truth in Manthara's words. How stupid of her that she had not understood the situation before! She imagined that she now saw through the whole vile plot of Dasaratha for degrading her and her son and bringing back Kausalya to power. So she made up her mind at once to resist the king at all costs. But how could she do this? The arrangements for the coronation of Rama had already gone too far. To-morrow was the day fixed, as she understood it. Something should therefore be done immediately. So she turned to Manthara for advice and found the vile hunchback equal to the occasion.

The maid now reminded her mistress of an exploit of hers in her youthful days, when she had driven Dasaratha's chariot in his war against Sambara, the demon king of Vaijayanta in the forests of Dandaka. Kaikeyi, by her skilful driving, had twice rescued her wounded husband from the hands of the enemy and won his praise. The grateful king had thereupon asked her to choose two boons and she had said she would choose them not then, but on a future occasion. "The occasion has come now," said Manthara. "Choose the coronation of Bharata and the banishment of Rama from the kingdom for fourteen years." The wily hunchback explained to Kaikeyi how the first boon

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was useless without the second. Bharata would not be safe on his throne, if Rama, his rival were to be at Ayodhya. At least fourteen years were required for Bharata to gain the love of his subjects who were now inordinately fond of Rama. Manthara also warned Kaikeyi against the blandishments of the king and any promises he might make of jewels, money, lands and possessions. The queen should not relent until the two suggested boons were granted. Thus did the hunchback win the day. Her mistress now stepped into her boudoir with the deadly resolution of breaking Dasaratha's cherished scheme.

She had not to wait long before the old, doting king came to her apartments, loudly calling her by her pet name with the intention of personally conveying to her the glad news of Rama's installation on the morrow. No answering voice greeted his ears. Kaikeyi was not in her usual place. Dasaratha therefore went in search of her and found her at last in her " anger-room " lying on the bare ground with her hair unloosed and all her ornaments cast away. He saw there was something wrong. " What is the matter? " he cried and sat down beside her on the uncarpeted floor. He then gently drew her to his bosom and caressed her and asked her who had done her wrong or what

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had gone amiss. Was she ill or did she hear any bad news? Why had she not sent him word? Where had her servants gone? Kaikeyi gave no reply to his questions and allowed the old man to rattle on. He said he could not bear to see his darling wife lying on the bare ground and took her in his lap and once more begged her to tell him what she wanted. She had only to express her desire and he would see it was immediately fulfilled. He swore by all that he held sacred that he would do what she asked him to do, would get for her what she asked him to get and would pass what orders she wanted him to pass.

Now Kaikeyi, shaking herself free from the arms of her husband, stood up and said, " May all the gods in heaven bear witness to the words you have spoken! You have promised to fulfil my desire. I hope you will not go back on your word." The king once more pledged his word and enquired what she wanted. She then reminded him of the two boons he had promised to give her at the time of his war against Sambara and said that the time had come for those boons to be granted. Thus doubly fortifying herself against any lapse on the part of Dasaratha, she gave out what she wanted. It was her son Bharata that should be crowned as heir to the kingdom and not Rama. Rama should

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be banished from the kingdom into the wilderness for fourteen years. Dasaratha could hardly believe his ears. Was this a joke or a dream or a delirium? But Kaikeyi repeated her request and stood her ground. The king asked her a hundred questions in his bewilderment. Had Rama offended her in any way? Had she quarrelled with Kausalya? Where had all her professions of equal love to all the princes alike gone? Who had put this poison into her mind? Was she going to put the Ikshvakus to shame? Had she no consideration for his feelings? Was it right? Was it just? What would the people think? His incredulity gave way to anger, his anger to shame and his shame to sorrow. He stormed and raged, he threatened and cursed, he appealed to her in abject terms and fell at her feet and begged her in most piteous words to spare him from the shame and the humiliation of acceding to her request. He said that Rama was such an obedient son that the father had only to say the word and he would start from Ayodhya that very day. He wished that Rama would disregard an order of this kind, as it was manifestly unjust. But he had no hopes that Rama would take such a view. The prince had always returned his father's love a hundredfold. To him the slightest wish of his father was a command which he would not

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dream of disobeying. And what would happen to Sita if the prince went into exile? Could the young princess bear the cruel burden? Would not her heart break? And what about Kausalya, the fond mother, who at that very moment was at her prayers invoking the blessings of all the gods on her beloved son and daughter-in-law on the eve of their coronation? Would she survive the shock if Rama was exiled from the country to-morrow instead of being crowned? And what about himself? He was old and infirm. He had long remained childless and after many a sacrifice and prayer to the gods he was blessed with four incomparable sons in his old age. Rama, the eldest of them, was absolutely peerless. He was a god on earth. He was perfect in every way. And was he to be banished from the realm? How could the prince, who was accustomed to all the comforts and pleasures befitting his rank, go into the wilderness, walking on foot, eating the berries of the forest and sleeping under the shade of trees? Oh! it was unthinkable. The king tried in a hundred ways to argue with Kaikeyi, to cajole her and make her see the dire consequences of insisting on what she desired. But all was in vain. He could not shake her from her resolution. To all his questions, appeals and threats she had only one answer. The king had

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given her a solemn promise. Was he going to break it?

Thus the angry scene went on for hours and hours between the king and the queen behind closed doors, while all the world outside was making preparations for the coronation the next day. The unhappy king did not know what to do. Once or twice he almost fainted away in his anguish. But Kaikeyi was unmoved. He threw his dignity to the winds and tried to touch her feet and make her relent. But she shifted her feet and he fell on the ground. There was nothing more to do. The evening wore on. Darkness fell. The night advanced. The moon arose and flooded the world with light. But there was no light in the heart of the king. " May it never dawn again," he sobbed aloud. " O star-spangled Night, have pity on me, I pray. Let not the day dawn. Or, if it must come, let it come at once and end my pain. Let me not see the face of this cruel woman any more."

But he made one more effort to avert the calamity. With folded hands he once more approached Kaikeyi and said, " I am old. I am at your mercy, my queen. Do have pity on me. I have announced this coronation to the public. May Rama get the kingdom from you as a gift! You will

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gain immortal renown by this gracious act. All the world will bless you." But it was only throwing words away. Kaikeyi had hardened her heart and nothing could be done. Meanwhile the day dawned. And the heralds came to the royal apartments to awake the king with their customary songs of praise, describing the greatness and the glory of Dasaratha of the Ikshvaku line. The unhappy king cried in a husky voice to them that he was wide awake and needed no awakening and drove them off.

When the day dawned, Vasishta, the family priest, sent word to the King through the charioteer Sumantra that all the necessary preparations for the coronation ceremony had been made and that his priests, vassals and subjects were awaiting his arrival. Sumantra, who had always free access to the queen's apartments, having heard that Dasaratha was still closeted with his favourite wife Kaikeyi, went near and announced his presence and wished the king happiness and joy. He at once saw there was something amiss and, withdrawing a little, awaited the orders of his master. But Dasaratha only mumbled that Sumantra's words of salutation were a torture to him. The charioteer was puzzled and looked at Kaikeyi, who then said to him, " Go and bring Rama here."

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Sumantra hastily returned and, making his way through the crowds which had assembled in the courtyard below to witness the coronation, ran to Rama's palace with this urgent message. The young prince and his wife had risen early and dressed themselves in suitable robes for the joyous occasion and were awaiting the signal to start for the ceremony. But when Sumantra came with a message that Dasaratha was with Kaikeyi and that they wanted to see Rama at once, he hastily took leave of the princess and drove through the streets of the capital to Kaikeyi's palace. When his chariot appeared in the streets there was a joyous outburst of applause from the assembled crowds. Windows were thrown open on either side of the street and women dropped flowers and sprinkled rose-water on the prince's head. And many loudly exclaimed, "How happy should Kausalya and Dasaratha be to-day!" They little knew the doom that was awaiting them all. With great difficulty Rama's chariot passed through the cheering crowds and reached Kaikeyi's palace. The prince got down and went upstairs to meet his parents. As soon as Dasaratha saw his son, he loudly exclaimed "O Rama" and averted his face streaming with tears and could not say a word more. Rama was alarmed. He turned to Kaikeyi

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and asked, "What is the matter, mother? Is my father angry with me for anything? Or is he ill? Or has anybody displeased him? Do tell me, mother. I have never seen him like this before." Unabashed she replied, "He is neither angry nor ill, O Rama. He has something unpleasant to tell you and he is afraid of saying it. If only you say that you will carry out his order, whether it is good or bad for you, I will tell you what it is."

"I am unhappy, indeed", cried Rama, "that my father doubts even for a moment that I may not obey him. His word has always been a command to me. I have never given him room for a doubt of this kind. I hope you, my mother, will not entertain any such doubt. I here give you my word of honour that I will carry out the orders of my king and father even if he asks me to jump into the sea or drink poison or walk through fire."

"Good!" said Kaikeyi. "I will now tell you what it is. Long before you or your brothers were born I rescued your father from the hands of the enemy in the battle-field and saved his life. In gratitude he solemnly promised to grant me any two boons I chose. I had no need for the boons then. But now I want them and have reminded the king of his promise. He now regrets that he made such a promise. He says it is impossible for

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him to keep his word, as the boons I have chosen may not be liked by you. So it all depends upon you, Rama, whether your father will be known as a truthful king or a promise-breaker. And I may say at once what the boons are that I have chosen. I want that my own son Bharata should be crowned as heir to the kingdom and that you should go into exile and lead an ascetic's life in the forests of Dandaka for fourteen years."

"Is this all?" cried Rama without a moment's hesitation. "Send for Bharata at once. I will leave for the forest to-day. It does not matter to me in the least whether I am crowned or Bharata, my beloved brother. Why did you go to my father and ask this as a great boon? You are my mother. If you had expressed to me the desire of your heart, I would have at once fulfilled it without all this confusion. It is not too late now. Please take it that your boons are granted. Neither my father nor I shall go back on a promise made. Let it not be said that a prince of the Ikshvaku line was not a man of his word."

At this stage Dasaratha could not contain himself any more. He uttered a loud cry and fell down unconscious. Rama rushed up and took his old father in his arms and placed him on a bed. After the king regained his consciousness, the

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prince asked Kaikeyi to console him and look to his comfort. He then left the room, saying that he would go and take leave of Kausalya and Sita and start for the forests of Dandaka that very day.

He first went to his mother's apartments and found her sitting before the sacred fire, invoking the blessings of the gods on her beloved son and daughter-in-law, who, she imagined, would be crowned by holy Brahmanas in a few hours. When she opened her eyes and saw her darling son standing before her she rose and clasped him to her heart and kissed him on the head and said, "May you live long, my son, and gain renown like the great royal sages of your line! How good and kind and loving is your father who is going to crown you his heir to-day! Do sit down for a while near me on this jewelled seat and taste these sweets, the offerings to the gods, before you go into the hall for the ceremony." Rama did not know how to break the news. Tears came to his eyes when he thought of the misery into which his mother would be plunged in a moment. But he mastered his feelings and said, "O my mother, I am sorry for you. You do not know what a terrible thing is awaiting you now, awaiting you and Sita and Lakshmana. Why offer this jewelled

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seat to one who has to go into the forests of Dandaka? Why offer these delicious sweets to one who has to live hereafter for fourteen years on wild berries and forest roots? The king, my father, has commanded now that Bharata should be crowned and that I should be exiled for fourteen years." Hearing these words Kausalya fell down like a mighty tree smitten at the root. After she came to herself and was informed of the turn of affairs, she wept bitterly for a long time and said, "O my son, if I had remained barren I should not have seen this unhappy day. Why did I pray all my life for a child? Was it to have my heart broken like this? My life has been very unhappy, my son. But with your birth I thought my troubles were at an end. What will happen to me if you go away from here? How can I live without seeing you, O Rama? If there is no help for it and you must go, I will go with you. I can't live here any more. Let Kaikeyi reign supreme in Ayodhya. You say you have to obey your father. Have you no duty to your mother? Will you leave me to my misery in this court? Oh! it is unbearable. How can I live here in this palace while you are away in the forest alone and exposed to sun and rain and surrounded by wild beasts? Have all my fasts and vigils and prayers resulted only in

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this? The sin I committed in my former birth must have been heinous indeed as my punishment is so heavy."

The poor old queen went on in this incoherent manner. She could not, however, shake Rama from his resolution. He gently told her that Dharma should be the primary concern for man in this life. Truth and righteousness should be followed at all costs. If promises could be broken and truth violated because they involved suffering and sacrifice, man's life would be no better than a beast's. It was as clear to him as daylight that he should go away to the forest of Dandaka to uphold his father's honour. To him that duty was more important than kingdom or earthly happiness. He was determined to go. No arguments, no appeals, no advice could make him turn away from what he deemed to be the path of honour. As for his mother Kausalya, it was her duty to remain at Ayodhya and be of comfort to his father in his old age. Now that Dasaratha was likely to change his attitude to Kaikeyi and withdraw his love from her, Kausalya should see that he lacked no comfort. It might be long before the king would recover from the shock of parting from him. Kausalya should therefore stand by him and nurse him back to normal life.

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Rama's task in persuading his mother to reconcile herself to the situation was not made easy by Lakshmana who, when he came to know of what had happened, stormed and raged against Kaikeyi and Dasaratha and said it was the duty of Rama to disobey this unjust and cruel order. Rama had to argue long with this impulsive brother of his before he could convince him that the honour of the family lay in their carrying out the wishes of Kaikeyi to the very letter. " Moreover, my dear Lakshmana" said Rama, " don't you see that the finger of God is behind all these events, and it is our duty to obey? How else could we explain the attitude of Kaikeyi born of a noble family and married into the famous Ikshvaku line and loved and revered by all of us as our own mother? It seems to me that Providence for its own inscrutable purpose is working behind the events of to-day. Whatever that may be, I feel it is my duty to obey this order of banishment as a divine decree. And I request you to help me to carry out this resolution of mine. And, after all, I am not banished for life. Fourteen years will pass like a dream. I will come back at the end of this period and we shall all be happy again. Meanwhile I entrust my mother and my young princess to your care. But, above all, take care of our father during my absence. He is old and infirm.

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I need not say more. I must now go to Sita and break the news to her. Heaven help me!"

So saying Rama returned to his own palace where the young princess was on the tip-toe of expectation for the coronation. He little knew that there was a surprise awaiting him here which would change his whole future. He had thought that Sita would weep and wail at the sudden change in their fortunes and that his most painful task that day would be parting from his young wife. But the crisis brought out the mettle of the daughter of Janaka. From that moment her wonderful character began to unfold itself. As soon as Rama entered her room she saw that something had gone wrong. For Rama, knowing what a shock he was going to give her, could not contain himself any longer. With tears in his eyes and a catch in his voice he replied to all her eager questions and in a few words informed her of the wishes of Kaikeyi and his duty to carry them out. He then began to exhort her to be humble and be obedient to Bharata when he became king and to be dutiful and serviceable to her old father-in-law and mother-in-law during his absence. He had made up his mind to leave Ayodhya that very day. For fourteen years his abode would be the deep forests of Dandaka and her duty would be to remain in Ayodhya and prove an obedient daughter-in-law

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of the Ikshvaku family. Sita listened patiently, though anger was rising in her heart, and she quietly said, " What is it that you say, O Prince, with such lightness of heart? Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, parents and children—each of them bears his or her own burden. But not so the wife. She is a partner of her husband for life. The King's command that you should go to the forests of Dandaka applies to me as well as to you. I am the daughter of Janaka and I know what my duties are as a wife. I have been well tutored by my parents and I require no tuition now. I must be by your side, wherever you are. There is no doubt about that. I would not care to be even in heaven, if you were not there. You are my heaven and we shall not part." Rama was a little startled at these words and said, " I know that you come of a noble family and that you are well versed in Dharma. But you are ignorant, my dear, of life in the forest. There even during broad daylight lions and tigers and other beasts of prey roam freely. The nights will be dark and full of dreadful noises. Huge loathsome serpents often crawl on the ground. They will lie across your path and make your flesh creep. Scorpions, wasps, red ants and other poisonous insects abound everywhere and will make your life miserable. You will have to live on roots and

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wild berries and sleep on beds of fallen leaves. You will have to cross rivers full of crocodiles and snakes. You will have to make your way through bushes full of thorns. All this is impossible for a woman and especially for you, a princess so delicately brought up. So you must give up this idea of accompanying me to the forests of Dandaka."

Sita now replied, her eyes full of tears, " These are no terrors for me. I am not going to the forest alone. My husband will be there to protect me. What have I to fear in your company, O Prince? Who can stand against your arrows? Your very presence will scare away lions and tigers. And if wild berries and beds of fallen leaves are no discomfort to you, they are no discomfort to me. You have also been brought up in a palace like me, and if you can endure hardships, so can I. I promise that I will not be a burden to you. If you allow me I will go even in front of you treading on the stumps of sharp *kusa* grass in the forest so that you may comfortably follow in my footsteps. No, no, I am not at all afraid of forest life. You know, when I was at Mithila before my marriage, eminent astrologers in my father's court predicted that I was going to live in a forest for some years. Ever since I heard this prediction I

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have been longing to see the strange flowers of the forest, to hear the notes of wild birds, to breathe the mountain air and bathe in the cool streams. I shall feel at home I am sure, in forests and on mountains. You remember I have sprung from the earth, from a ploughshare's furrow, not born in a palace like you."

Rama had still his fears that the princess might not be equal to the hardships of forest life and made one more effort to dissuade her. He told her how his mother, Kausalya, too in her first outburst of sorrow had desired to accompany him to the forest and how he had persuaded her to remain in Ayodhya and he hoped that his young wife would also listen to reason and do the same.

But Sita said, " It is not I that am unreasonable, but you. You now talk like a woman, not I. You have told your mother that it is her first duty to look after her husband and remain with him. Is it not my first duty too to look after my husband and be with him? My dear lord, you can't argue me out of my resolution. What I say is in full accord not only with reason but also with scriptures, with history and with tradition. You are well versed in all these things and you know what they say. Is it not laid down in our holy books that

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when a woman is given away in marriage to a man by her parents with due ceremony, she is his and he is hers for all time—not only in this world but also in the next—and that they should lead one life in joy and in sorrow and never part from each other? Did not Savitri follow Satyavan to the forest and save him from untimely death? O my dear husband, I can't live here without you even for a day. I am young. My life is bound up with yours. I am yours for ever. I can't bear even for a moment the thought that you are to be away in the forest, while I remain in a palace. Don't speak of parting any more. It cannot be. The forest is no forest to me with you beside me, and without you heaven is no heaven to me. O my dear lord, don't drive me to despair. You are my life, my light, my love. This heart of mine is a temple and you are the god I worship there. If you go away leaving me behind I shall go mad with the thought of you. I will drown myself or drink poison."

The prince now saw there was no use of resisting her any further and said, "If you are so determined, my dear, I can leave you no more than a man of honour can leave his honour. Don't cry. It would break my heart. Together we go to the forests of Dandaka and none shall part us. There is no time to lose. Go in and give away all your

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diamonds, your jewels and your silks to the poor and the needy. Let us empty ourselves thoroughly We are going to be ascetics in a forest."

The princess smiled through her tears and rose hastily from her seat to do her husband's bidding and prepare herself for the journey.

When Lakshmana came to know that his brother was determined to leave Ayodhya that day and was also taking his wife with him, he at once ran to him and, clasping his feet, begged earnestly that he should be permitted to accompany them. "I will be of great service to you", said he, "I will cut a way for you in the impenetrable woods, gather berries from bushes and trees, fetch water from the brooks and stand guard at night when you are asleep. If you are taking the Princess with you, certainly you require my help. You can't leave her alone in the forest and go to gather food or fight the wild beast or robber that comes to molest you. We will guard the Princess by turns at night when she goes to sleep. She will be safer when there are two men to protect her, instead of one."

"I shall be most happy, my beloved brother", said Rama, "If you go with us and help us. But if both of us go who is there to console our mothers—Kausalya and Sumitra? Who is there to look after

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our old father? Bharata will be under the influence of Kaikeyi and may not pay any attention to them. No, no, my dear brother. You will do well to stay in Ayodhya and do your duty by our old parents. We can look after ourselves."

"What protection does Kausalya need" asked Lakshmana, "from a man like me? She is enthroned in the hearts of all the people. She has a hundred attendants who love and revere her. She can protect me and my mother Sumitra and scores of people like us. Her magnanimity, her generosity and her natural goodness of heart disarm all opposition and make her foes ashamed of themselves. And she can also take care of our father, now that he repents the injustice he has done to her."

Rama was pleased with the words of Lakshmana and, giving him permission, asked him to bring from the armoury all the great weapons—the bows and the arrows the armour and the sword—which had been presented to them in the court of Janaka. Lakshmana jumped with joy and went out and brought these weapons and helped his brother and sister-in-law in giving away all their belongings to the poor and the needy. All the three then went to Dasaratha to take leave of him.

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When their arrival was announced to the king who was surrounded by his counsellors, he sent word to his wives and all the ladies of the palace to come and bless the children who were going into exile for fourteen years. They all came and took their seats, and Rama, Lakshmana and Sita were admitted into the royal presence. The whole assembly rose as they entered and the old king began to sob aloud. Rama went up to his father and helped him to his seat and asked his permission to take Lakshmana and Sita with him.

"I have tried to argue with them, father. But they don't listen to me. At last I have yielded to them. So if you have no objection, I will allow them to go with me." But Dasaratha said, "You yourself need not go, my son. I am old and foolish and have been duped by Kaikeyi. Set aside this unjust decree, O Rama, and stay and rule in Ayodhya."

Rama now folded his hands and made obeisance to his father and said, "That cannot be, father. All these numberless years you have been known to the world as a righteous king. And it is not meet that I should make you unrighteous by my conduct. You have ruled the country for so many years. Continue to rule for fourteen years more. I will come back after fulfilling my vow and sit

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at your feet as before. Come, please give us permission to depart."

"You are the very embodiment of Dharma, O Rama", said Dasaratha, "and I can't change your mind, I see. But do stay here this night, my son. You may go to-morrow, if go you must. Allow your mother and me to have your company for a few hours more. Let your hard life begin to-morrow, not to-day."

"No, father", pleaded Rama. "We have given away all our things. We cannot stay. The sooner we accustom ourselves to our new life, the better. Nothing is gained by our staying here a few hours more. Don't take this too much to heart, my father. Comfort these ladies here who are in tears."

As he said these words, all the ladies of the palace assembled there, except Kaikeyi, wept aloud. The sight was too much for Sumantra, the faithful charioteer of Dasaratha. Trembling with sorrow and anger he burst out reproaching Kaikeyi for her hard-heartedness. "I have known two generations of you, O Kaikeyi. Hard-hearted was your mother who never cared whether her husband lived or died, and hard-hearted are you. By your deceit and wiles you are banishing to-day the rightful Prince. Let your son rule the kingdom. We will all go away where Rama is and leave Ayodhya in

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ruins. You and your son may rule over the ruins. But even at this last moment I appeal to you. Annul this cruel decree. And all people will bless you. You will gain immortal fame."

All eyes were now turned to Kaikeyi, but she averted her face and said not a word. "There is no use, Sumantra," cried Dasaratha, "of your appealing to one who has a heart of stone. Go and order all my army to get ready and start with Rama. Let them go to the forest and stay with him for his protection. Also, let all my treasuries, store-houses and granaries be emptied and let all my wealth be taken into the forest along with Rama. My son shall lack no comfort, wherever he is."

At these words Kaikeyi faced the king and said, "I protest against this order. You and Rama have consented to give the kingdom to Bharata. But a kingdom is no kingdom when all its wealth and army are removed from it. Do you think it right to promise a kingdom and give a wilderness? My son will not taste the stale wine that has been left over."

Rama now intervened and said, "Father, what is the good of all this army and wealth to me? I am going to lead an ascetic's life in the forests of Dandaka. That is the promise I have given. An ascetic cannot have armies and attendants. He

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cannot have wealth of any kind. No, no. Please give all the army and wealth to my brother Bharata. He has to live in state, not I. Matted locks and bark garments are the signs of an ascetic. So if you please, give us some bark garments so that we may leave our silks behind."

Kaikeyi had already ordered these garments for the exiles and she said, "Here they are; I have got them ready for all of you."

Both Rama and Lakshmana now put off their splendid clothes and donned the ascetic's garb. Trembling Sita took the pieces of cloth intended for her, but did not know how to put them on. She wrapped one round her neck and another round her arm and stood shame-faced in her ignorance. Then Rama stepped up to her and began to wrap the crude pieces of cloth round her on the white silken robe the princess was wearing, while all the royal ladies wept. They cried to Rama saying, "Your father's command applied to you only, O Rama, and not to the Princess. Do leave her behind. We will take care of her in your absence. Take Lakshmana with you for help, but leave Sita with us. The young Princess should not lead an ascetic's life. She should not go into a forest."

Rama paid no heed to their cries and lamentations, but Vasishtha, the family priest, when he saw

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the princess thus arrayed, could not contain himself. His wrath burst on Kaikeyi, like a loud thunder-clap. He cried, "You are a disgrace to this family, O Kaikeyi. You, shameless sinner, are there no limits to your indecency? The Princess shall not wear these garments. She shall not go to the forest. We will not give her up. She shall be our Queen. We will all go wherever she is. Even Bharata and Satrughna will go with us. You will see that your son will also wear bark garments and go into the forest and be the servant of Rama and Sita. I know Bharata better than you. You can never succeed in inducing him to accept the throne. You may as well succeed in flying up to the clouds. He is a true Ikshvaku. He knows what is right and wrong better than you. He will not thank you for what you have done for him. He will look upon you as his worst enemy. You are no mother to him. You will soon see him and all of us in Ayodhya going after Rama and Sita. You will soon see even the birds and beasts of this city and even the firm-rooted trees looking as if they would go after them." "No, sir", he cried turning to Dasaratha, "the Princess shall not wear these garments. I forbid. I forbid it altogether. Let all her robes and jewels be restored to her."

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"I agree", cried Dasaratha, "I agree with every word that the holy Vasishtha has said. Sita shall not wear the ascetic dress. Go, chamberlain, calculate and bring as many robes of silk as the Princess will require for her wear during the next fourteen years. Get her all the best jewels of the crown in the treasury. The daughter of Janaka and the Princess of Kosala shall dress as befits her rank, wherever she goes She has nothing to do with these wretched boons or vows or promises."

His orders were obeyed The silks and jewels were brought. And Sita was arrayed as she was on her bridal day. Fresh and pure she shone like the morning sun on the eastern horizon. Kausalya came up to her with tears in her eyes and blessed her. "Be not like the ordinary women of the world, my daughter," she said, "they love and respect their husbands only so long as fortune smiles on them. But when adversity comes, they turn sour or peevish and begin to grumble against them and blame them." "Have no such fears, my mother", said Sita, "I assure you, mother, that as the sunlight never leaves the sun, I will never leave the wifely Dharma that I have been taught."

Then Rama came and clasped his mother's feet and took leave of her, saying "Fourteen years will pass like a shadow, mother. Have patience a

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little while. I will come back and we shall all be happy. Meanwhile take care of my father." He then went up to his father and said, "Now that I am going away, father, I beg you to look after my mother. You know how unhappy she is. But she has not said a word against you after this turn of events. Kindly see, I pray to you, that she does not feel my absence."

Then he turned to his step-mothers and all the ladies of the palace assembled there and said with folded hands, "Mothers all, if through ignorance or familiarity I have said anything harsh to you or done anything wrong, I pray, forgive me. I take leave of you all." They burst into tears and could say nothing in reply. Lakshmana now came up and prostrated himself first before Kausalya and then before his own mother Sumitra. The latter raised her son, took him in her arms, kissed him on the head and exhorted him to serve with love and faith his elder brother and sister-in-law in the forest, for it was part of the Ikshvaku tradition to do reverence to one's elders and serve them faithfully.

"Look upon Rama as your father," she said, "and on Sita as your mother. Regard the Dandaka forest as Ayodhya. Go with a glad heart, my son."

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While these sad leave-takings were going on, Sumantra, the charioteer, got ready under orders from the king a magnificent chariot equipped with the best horses for conveying the royal exiles to their destination. Sita first stepped into the chariot and then Lakshmana and Rama. The king and all his household stood near the palace gates weeping and wailing. With great effort Rama gave the order to the charioteer to go. But it was not easy to go. For all the highways were thronged with the sorrowing citizens of Ayodhya. Men, women and children in their hundreds of thousands had come out of their homes to have a last look at their beloved prince and princess whom a cruel Fate was driving away from the kingdom. Ever since they heard in the morning of the sudden reverse in the fortunes of Rama and Sita people neither ate nor drank. They ran hither and thither for authentic news. They besieged the palace gates and wanted to know what was going on within. Hundreds of questions were asked. Why was the coronation stopped when such grand preparations had been made for it? What were Kaikeyi's demands? When were the boons granted to her? How was Rama bound by them? Was Bharata consulted in the matter? How was Kausalya taking this? Has the Princess also to go? Was Dasaratha so helpless in

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the hands of Kaikeyi? How could he survive this shock? What was Vasishtha doing? What were the ministers doing? Could they not prevent this cruel injustice? Could they ever see Rama's equal in courage, strength, beauty and goodness? Was he not an incarnation of Dharma? Were they really to lose him? These and similar questions were asked and answered by the various groups of people according to their knowledge and temperament. And when at last all their doubts were set at rest by the appearance of the chariot with Rama and Lakshmana in it, now scarcely recognisable in their ascetic garb, there was consternation all around. They would not let the chariot go. Some caught hold of the horses, some the reins, some jumped into the carriage and some hung on to it with deafening cries and begged Sumantra not to drive the horses. They must have their Prince. He should not leave them thus. Rama, on the other hand, asked Sumantra to speed the horses and go out of the city as quickly as he could. However in some places the prince had to step out and speak to the people and ask them to go back to their homes. He had to argue with them that Dharma required that he should go to the forest and that, if he would not go, he did not deserve to be their king. Dharma was something above human pleasures and pains.

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It had to be followed in all circumstances, pleasant or unpleasant. He pointed out that, while his Dharma was now to leave Ayodhya, theirs was to remain there and serve Dasaratha as before. But the people would not listen to him. When the chariot moved again and the horses began to run, they ran alongside of them with their appeals and cries. In one place where Sumantra thought he had succeeded in eluding the crowd and was about to set the horses in a gallop he heard a loud cry of lamentation behind. The party in the chariot was startled and asked the charioteer to look back and tell them what it was. He turned round in his seat and exclaimed, "O heavens, I see, sir, your old father and mother—Dasaratha and Kausalya—running with outstretched arms towards us. There is a cloud of dust and the people whom we have turned back have joined them and are wildly crying to us to stop. O harrowing sight! What shall I do?" Rama burst into tears and cried, "O good Sumantra drive on, I pray, drive on and don't look behind. I can't bear it. It will break my heart." He then leaned on Lakshmana's arm and wept long like a child, for he feared he might not see his father again in this life. Meanwhile the horses broke into a gallop and Ayodhya was left behind.

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CHAPTER IV

BY the evening they reached the Tamasa Sumantra stopped the chariot on the banks of the river, released the horses and proposed that the party should rest there for the night. But little rest had they, for, before darkness fell, a big crowd of the citizens of Ayodhya who had been running behind their chariot reached the place and begged the prince to return home. He argued with them far into the night. But they were unconvinced and said before they retired for rest that they would follow him wherever he went. So Rama arose very early and asked Sumantra to convey his party secretly over the bridge across the stream and drive the chariot hither and thither so that the people might not know the exact route he took.

Thus the prince eluded his loving subjects, crossed the boundary of Kosala and reached the holy Ganges by the evening and decided to rest there for the night. His friend, Guha, the King of the Nishadas, who lived on the banks of the river, heard of his arrival and came to him with all his men and brought him rich food of various kinds. Rama was glad to meet him, but, as he was under ascetic vows, he could not accept the food that was brought. He accepted only grass for his horses.

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Rama and Sita rested there for the night, while Guha and Lakshmana mounted guard over the sleeping princess. The next morning Rama bade farewell to Sumantra and asked him to take the chariot home and convey his loving message to his father and mother. After Sumantra's departure the party crossed the Ganges in the boat furnished by Guha.

The wanderings of the royal party now began. Hitherto they had travelled in a chariot. Henceforth they had to go on foot from place to place. Lakshmana always went in front, Sita next and Rama brought up the rear. Thus did the brothers guard the princess in all their wanderings. They were now in the land of the Vatsas and, after walking the whole day, reached a big shady tree by the evening and resolved to rest there for the night. Here once more Rama tried to induce Lakshmana to go back home and comfort their aged parents, leaving him and his wife to enter the forests of Dandaka according to his vow. But Lakshmana would not hear of such a proposal. So they rose early the next morning and walked towards the place where the Jumna meets the Ganges. Rama knew that the hermitage of the holy Rishi Bharadwaja was somewhere there and walking till midday saw at some distance a clump of trees

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encircled with smoke. They reached the place before evening and were heartily welcomed by the sage who came out of his Ashram surrounded by his pupils and his pet animals and birds. He had heard the story of the banishment and so told Rama that he might stay in his Ashram and spend his time happily with him. But Rama observed that the place was too near the towns and villages from which people might come to see him and Sita. Therefore he begged the sage to direct him to a spot deep in the forest; far away from the haunts of men. Then the sage replied, "About twenty miles from this place in the western direction, on the other side of the Jumna, there is a mountain called Chitrakuta. It abounds in good fruit and wild honey. It has plenty of streams and waterfalls. It is the haunt of herds of deer and flocks of peacocks, of lapwings and kokils. I know the place well. I think it would be the ideal spot for you. The Princess would love it for its beauty."

So early the next morning Rama, Sita and Lakshmana took leave of Bharadwaja and went in the direction of Chitrakuta. They had to construct a raft for crossing the Jumna. They cut down a few branches from the trees on the bank, got some bamboo poles from the thickets and tied them

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together with thin wire-like roots and creepers. When the craft was ready, Lakshmana prepared a high seat on it for Sita with soft leaves and grass and Rama helped her in to it. Modestly smiling the young princess waded through the water and with considerable difficulty ascended her leafy throne. Then the two brothers stood on either end of the raft with long poles in their hands and steered it across the swift-flowing river. And all the time Sita was praying to the gods in heaven for their safe passage.

After they reached the other side, they abandoned the bark and proceeded towards their destination. Whenever the princess saw on the way any tree or herb or flower which she had not seen before, she would question Rama about it, for her curiosity was great. And whenever she wanted a particular flower or any sweet-smelling herb, Lakshmana would go and get it for her and she would walk, her hands full of twigs and creepers loaded with blossom. She would often stop to listen to the notes of wild birds or admire the bright colours and spots on the wings of butterflies. She would laugh when monkeys peered at them through branches of trees or chattered to their young. And when she saw peacocks with folded plumage, she would imitate their cries to make them unfold their

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colours in the sun. Thus in a thousand ways she expressed her immense delight in these sylvan scenes and gladdened the heart of her husband. Rama had never seen her so happy before. They reached Chitrakuta at last. The fertility and the beauty of the place far exceeded their expectations.

"Look at these red kimsuka flowers, my dear," cried Rama. "They make the trees ablaze with fire, as it were. And see how these bhallataka trees are bent with the burden of their abundant fruit. We shall not suffer here from lack of food. And, O Lakshmana, have you observed those hanging honey-combs in that cluster of trees? I have never seen such big ones before. In this wood thick with spring blossoms the natyuha is singing and the peacocks are answering with their cries. Look, how many flowers have fallen on the ground. The place is fairly level here, though the hills rise to a great height on the western side. I think it is the roar of the wild elephants that we hear from behind those cliffs. I wonder whether there are any Rishis in those fastnesses performing *tapas*. We seem to have plenty of water here. I suppose all the rain that falls on the hills is collected into this stream winding its way through the forest. Perhaps this is the Malyavati which

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joins the Jumna somewhere. It is really an ideal spot for us, Lakshmana. Let us build a hut and live here."

Accordingly in a few days they built a hut which could well stand the wind and the rain and lived there happily for some time.

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CHAPTER V

MEANWHILE events were moving fast in Ayodhya. Sumantra returned to the capital and found it almost a dead city. People were dazed. All shops were closed, all amusements were stopped and all the streets were deserted. The charioteer went to the palace and learnt that the king had been carried home unconscious to Kausalya's chambers where he was hovering between life and death, in spite of the tender care of the queen. Sumantra's return was only a signal for the renewal of wailing and lamentation in the royal apartments. A thousand questions were put to the charioteer about where Rama was, what he ate, where he slept and how the princess bore the hardships of the journey. Sumantra replied as best as he could and conveyed the messages of the prince to his parents.

Five days passed thus after Rama's banishment and on the sixth at midnight Dasaratha lay sleepless on his bed in his agony and remembered how in his youth he had inadvertently discharged an arrow, while hunting in the forest, and killed a boy who was taking water from a brook for his blind and aged parents and how he was cursed by the boy's father, who said that the king too would, like him, die in his old age of grief for his son. So his

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sins had found him at last. The Law of Karma was inexorable. Dasaratha's memory became vivid for a moment. He remembered the incident as if it had taken place only a few days before, and narrated it to Kausalya in minute detail and sank back exhausted. He felt his end was near. He once more thought of his beloved son and crying feebly "O Rama, O Rama, where are you?" breathed his last.

The next day the king's council met. It was resolved that an urgent message should be sent to Bharata, as he was the declared heir to the kingdom. Till he arrived the king's body should be preserved in oil. Accordingly messengers were despatched to fetch him. They were instructed not to breathe a word to him about either Rama's banishment or Dasaratha's death. He should be simply summoned home on urgent business in the name of Vasishta and the ministers of the crown. The messengers rode post haste, past the countries of the Panchalas, the Kalingas and the Bahlikas, crossed the rivers—the Saradanda, the Ikshumati and the Vipasa—, and passing through many a forest on the way, reached at last Girivraja, the capital of the Kekayas, where Bharata was staying with his uncle and grandfather. Bharata had already some premonitions about the death of his father.

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He had had bad dreams in which he saw Dasaratha now floating in a dirty pond, now drinking oil in a cask and now driving a chariot drawn by asses and going south laughing hideously. The prince was perturbed and was narrating his dreams to his friends, when the envoys arrived at his uncle's court with the urgent message. Bharata questioned them eagerly about his father's health and about the welfare of his brothers—Rama and Lakshmana.

" And how is my mother, Kaikeyi? " asked the prince. " Passionate and self-willed, she always thinks she is wise, which she is not."

The messengers quickly replied, " All are well, of whom you enquire, O Prince. Vasishta and the ministers want you immediately at Ayodhya. The goddness of good fortune is awaiting you."

Bharata could not understand these words. But he obeyed the summons. He hastily took leave of his grandfather and uncle and started that very day with his retinue. Seven days and nights he travelled. His followers could not keep pace with him. So Bharata went ahead in his chariot and entered Ayodhya a little after sunrise on the eighth day. He found the city strangely silent. The streets were unswept. The temples had no worshippers. The shops remained closed. There were a few stragglers on the main road and they looked

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famine-stricken. It was all a dismal sight. Bharata was puzzled. He hurried home to his father's palace, and, finding all the doors and windows closed, crossed the courtyard and went to his mother's apartments. Kaikeyi came out and eagerly took her son in her arms and asked him about the welfare of her father and brother. Bharata answered all her questions and said, " But I want first to pay my respects to my father. Where is he? I don't find him in the palace."

" Your venerable father, O Prince, has gone the way of all flesh," slowly answered Kaikeyi.

Bharata at once sank on the floor, and as the tears streamed from his eyes he covered his face and wept. His mother sat beside him and drew him gently to her and said, " A prince like you, my son, who has to rule a kingdom should bear his sorrow in a more manly way."

" O mother, I never expected this," cried Bharata. " When I was sent for so urgently I thought my father was going to perform a great sacrifice or was going to crown Rama formally and place him on the throne. And so I have rushed here with my heart full of joy. Why did those messengers say that all were well at Ayodhya? What did my father die of? What were his last words? Did he think of me and say anything? "

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" Oh! no, my son ," she replied. ' He had no thought of you. He died, crying O Rama, O Sita ".

" How fortunate is Rama that he was by his bed-side during our father's last moments and was able to perform his funeral rites! " said Bharata. " Please send word to him that I have come. I have to look up to him hereafter as to my father. He will be the head of the family and the ruler of the kingdom. And none is worthier than he to rule over us and guide us."

" Rama is not in town, O Bharata," Kaikeyi began. " He and his wife are away in the forests of Dandaka. Rama has been banished the realm by his father. He—"

" O! what crime has the virtuous Rama committed? " demanded Bharata. " It is unthinkable that he shoud be guilty of anything. How did he slip from the path of virtue? "

Then Kaikeyi gave him an account of all that had happened during Bharata's absence how Dasaratha wanted to take advantage of his absence and crown Rama king, how she checkmated him and asked for the two boons he had promised years ago, how neither the king nor the king's council could resist her demands, how Rama volunteered to go into exile, leaving the kingdom to his brother and how Dasaratha died of grief because his long-cherished

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plans were frustrated and his favourite son could not get the throne. " Take courage, my son. Don't give way to unmanly grief," she concluded. " The kingdom is yours. I have won it for you. Rule it wisely and well. Send for Vashishta now and perform your father's funeral rites and afterwards get yourself crowned with due pomp and solemnity."

When Bharata heard these words, he sprang up like a trampled snake writhing with anger and cried, "You have brought ruin on my father's house. You are my enemy, not my mother. O, you heartless woman, you have killed my father, you have banished my brother and you are heaping coals of fire on my head with these words of yours. What demon or evil spirit has possessed your mind that you have acted thus? You have disgraced the Ikshvaku race for ever in the eyes of the world. Your father and your brothers will be ashamed of you when they know what you have done. Do you think I will submit to your evil designs? No, never. I will defeat your object, you will see. I will go to the forest and bring my brother back and place him on the throne and be his servant all my life."

Then he thought of the wrong done to Kausalya who had always treated him with great affection, and went in search of her along with Satrughna. She and Sumitra had heard of his arrival and were

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about to come to him and see whether he too was changed like his mother. The two brothers entered the queen's apartment and prostrated themselves before her and stood up. Tears trickled down her face as they did so. But she suppressed her sorrow and said dryly, " You will be king, my son. Your path has been made easy for you. All that we request you to do is to take me and Sumitra to the forests, where Rama is making *tapas* for his sins."

When Bharata heard these hard words, he fell at the feet of Kausalya and clasping them with both his hands cried sobbing, " You know, mother, my love for Rama. Is it right for you to say what you have said? May all the six deadly sins seize my soul and hurl it down into the world of Yama, if I have had any knowledge of this evil plot! " Kausalya was startled by the vehemence of Bharata's speech and was convinced of his innocence.

" Fortunately, my boy ", she said " you are as steadfast in Dharma as Lakshmana, who has accompanied Rama and Sita to the forest." She then drew him into her arms and kissed him on his head.

Now Vasishta came along, and, after sadly greeting Bharata, told him that the obsequies of the old king could no longer be delayed. Arrangements were accordingly made. All the ministers of State,

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the Brahmana priests, the women of the royal household with their servants and the chief citizens of Ayodhya assembled in the front courtyard of the palace. The body was taken out of the oil and placed in a stately palanquin underneath a richly decorated canopy. The solemn procession then marched from the palace gates towards the banks of the Sarayu. Thousands of men and women joined on the way whispering to one another as they marched, " What a pity that Rama, the eldest son of the King, is not here to-day to perform the ceremonies." They reached the river at last and on a pyre of sandalwood placed the king's body. The Brahmanas chanted the funeral hymns and Bharata lighted the pyre with appropriate ceremonies. Then all the people bathed in the river and performed *tarpana* for the spiritual benefit of the departed soul and returned home late in the day.

After the eleventh and the twelfth day ceremonies were over, the king's council met and urged Bharata to appoint a day for his coronation, and make the necessary preparations. His reply was characteristic of the prince.

" You all know, Councillors of State ", said he, " that in the Ikshvaku line it is the eldest son that should succeed to his father's throne. It is not meet therefore that you should ask me to become

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king. My elder brother, Rama, is now the King of Kosala. I will go and bring him. Do you soon get an army ready. We will all go and beg him to return to his capital. Let us take with us all the necessary things for his coronation. We will crown him king in the forest itself and bring him to Ayodhya in a procession."

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CHAPTER VI

WHEN the ministers heard this resolution of Bharata they shed tears of joy and warmly praised the righteous prince. They immediately passed orders that roads should be repaired, bridges built, wells dug and houses requisitioned so that the army to be led by Bharata might easily go from Ayodhya to the forest abode of Rama. After the arrangements were complete, Bharata started at the head of the army, consisting of nine thousand elephants, one hundred thousand cavalry and a fleet of sixty thousand chariots. Every noble chief, every minister of State and every priest of the royal household wanted to go with the army. All the ladies of the palace in their bright and glittering carriages joined the cavalcade. The queens Kausalya and Sumitra were only too glad to go with them and meet their sons. Kaikeyi, who had by now been brought to her senses by the righteous conduct of her son, was foremost among the ladies of the palace to join the company. And many citizens of Ayodhya, according to their wealth and rank rode behind them all on their elephants, camels, horses or mules. They went by easy stages. When they reached the banks of the Ganges, where Guha, the king of the Nishadas, ruled the land. they camped in his territory and the

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prince performed *tarpana* for his father with the waters of the holy river. Guha at first suspected the motives of Bharata in going to seek out Rama with a big army. He thought that Kaikeyi's son might wish to complete the work of his mother by putting an end to his rival. But after a frank talk with the Prince he was convinced of his love and loyalty and eagerly showed him the places where Rama and Sita had slept on beds of leaves, where Lakshmana had washed their feet before they retired to rest and where Guha himself had mounted guard over the sleeping princess. Bharata wept to see those beds of straw and leaves and vowed that from that day he would also wear the ascetic's dress, live on fruits and water and lie on the bare ground like his elder brother. " And grant me this prayer, O gods," he cried, " that Rama consent to go back to Ayodhya and be crowned, while I take his place in the forest and lead the life of an exile for fourteen years to expiate the sin of my mother!"

The next day Guha, who had at first ordered his men to be ready with five hundred ships to prevent the army of Bharata from crossing the river, now placed these vessels at the disposal of the army and helped them to cross it with all their chariots, elephants and horses. He then volun-

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teered to accompany the prince and help him to seek his elder brother. They went in the direction of Bharadwaja's ashrama and reaching it, were welcomed by the sage. Bharadwaja too, like Guha, suspected Bharata and asked him whether he intended to do any harm to his brother. Bharata did not know what to say. "O revered Sir, when you too begin to suspect me, I am really undone. It was all my mother's doing. I was away from Ayodhya at the time. I am made miserable by all that has taken place. I have come into the forest with a big army. I am going to fall at the feet of my wronged brother and beg him to return to Ayodhya and be crowned. Do tell me, Sir, where I can find him."

"You say you have come with a big army. Where is your army?" asked the sage.

"I have stopped it at a little distance from the hermitage", replied Bharata, "lest it should disturb the peace of this place."

"Bring it here" said the sage. "I will entertain your soldiers to-day and will give you instructions to-morrow to go and seek your brother."

Bharata wondered how the sage who was living in his ashrama with a few pupils could entertain a huge army like his. But Bharadwaja had yogic powers by which he could do wonders unimaginable

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to ordinary men. In a moment at his bidding thousands of invisible agents came from nowhere, as it were, and carried out all his wishes. So when the army came near the hermitage, it saw a tract of land literally flowing with milk and honey and abounding in all things necessary for the sustenance of man and beast. The soldiers ate and drank to their hearts' content as in a dream and fed their horses and elephants. Every man in the camp was supplied with the dishes he loved most. And all were satisfied.

When the time for departure came, the queens of Dasaratha approached the holy man for his blessing and Bharata introduced them to him. In doing so he spoke rather harshly about his mother Kaikeyi as one who was responsible for all the present unhappiness in the family. But Bharadwaja checked him.

" Blame not your mother, O Prince " said the holy man, " she was only an instrument in the hands of Providence. I foresee great and lasting good resulting to both gods and men and especially to the Rishis of this land from Rama's going to the forest now."

The army moved on again. When it entered the forest round Chitrakuta, all the wild animals living there were scared by the advancing multitude

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of men, horses, elephants and chariots and ran in different directions adding to the noise and bustle. Bharata was struck with the beauty of the place. He thought it was a fit abode for the god-like Rama and Sita. He did not want to disturb the peace of the surroundings. So he stationed the army at some distance from the mountain and sent small companies of men to go and explore and find out where the abode of the exiles lay. One of these companies quickly returned and reported that they saw smoke over a clump of trees and the signs of human habitation on the path leading to the spot. Bharata now asked them all to stay with the army and himself proceeded to the spot accompanied only by Satrughna and Sumantra.

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CHAPTER VII

A MONTH had passed since Rama and Lakshmana built their hut near Chitrakuta. They had been quite happy there. And so was Sita, whose sweet personality seemed to blossom forth in the open air amidst birds and flowers and mountain streams. Rama would take her out every morning and show her all the beauty spots around the hill. He would climb trees and pluck ripe fruit for her. He would shake the branches of jambu trees and she would gather the fruit that fell on the clean grass below. Or he would hold down an amalaka sprig and she would pluck the berries herself. The princess was particularly fond of flowers, of which there were endless varieties on the mountain slope. There were here ketakas, punnagas, sthagaras, bhurjas and a thousand other flowers whose fragrance filled the air. Sita would carry home as many of these as she could and adorn her hair. She would venture to go some distance even into the mountain pools and, with one hand holding her husband's, would bend and pull out with the other a particularly white lotus or a blue utpala. Sometimes they would both sit under the shade of a projecting rock and watch chakravakas winging by or squirrels chasing one another on branches of trees or bees buzzing about their hives. Or, if the

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weather was fine, they would lie on the cool grass and see white patches of clouds sailing across the blue sky or sarasas poised on their wings in the mid air. But their favourite amusement on warm days was to bathe in the pure cold water of the Mandakini flowing at the foot of the hill not far from their hut and throw up handfuls of water at each other in sport. At times Lakshmana would accompany them when they sailed out, but would more often stay at home mending a wall or splitting firewood or filling the water-pots.

On the day on which Bharata approached Chitrakuta Rama was sitting along with Lakshmana and Sita on the bank of the Mandakini and commenting on the happiness of their life in the forest.

" I have no doubt lost a kingdom in Ayodhya," said he, " but have we not gained one—a more beautiful one—in Chitrakuta? Bathing thrice a day in this river and living on fruits and honey and roaming in these woods in your company, O Sita, I have no desire to go back to Ayodhya even at the end of my fourteen years. But why are these animals running away in all directions? What is that cloud of dust on the northern horizon due to? Is it a hunting party? Climb this tree, O Lakshmana, and see what it is."

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Lakshmana accordingly climbed a tall sala tree, looked in the northern direction and reported that he saw, not a small hunting party, but a big army with horses, elephants and chariots.

" Whose army could it be in this deep forest? " questioned Rama and added, " Observe carefully, Lakshmana, and let us know."

Then Lakshmana ascended to the top of the tree and after a few minutes exclaimed in uncontrollable anger, " O perfidy! It is Bharata, the son of Kaikeyi, that is coming on us with his army. He is marching in front. That is his elephant, I know. And there is his banner. He is not satisfied with his kingdom. He is coming here to desroy us, I am sure. Make haste, O Rama. Let us take our bows and arrows and withdraw to the mountain and meet his attack there. We will kill him and get back the kingdom."

Saying these words, he hastily descended from the tree and in great excitement faced Rama and Sita, who had risen from the grass and were looking in the direction pointed out by him. Rama now tried to pacify him, saying, " Shall we bend our bows against our own brother, Lakshmana? Having promised to give the kingdom to Bharata, is it right that I should seek to kill him when he comes to meet me of his own accord? You are always

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nasty, my dear Lakshmana. Probably Bharata, after returning home to Ayodhya, heard for the first time of what had taken place, and, as he is very much attached to me, is coming here to see me. You seem to hanker very much after the kingdom, my brother. If so, I will ask Bharata, when he comes here, to give the kingdom to you. I am sure he will do it, if I tell him to."

Lakshmana was now ashamed of himself and hung his head, and Sita suggested that they might go to their hut and await the arrival of Bharata there. Accordingly they left the place in haste.

Meanwhile Bharata's party hastened to the spot noting the signs of human habitation on the way—heaps of firewood left to dry in the sun, pieces of cloth on bushes and thorns and the narrow foot-paths trodden by the feet of men. At last they sighted the spacious cottage, and going near saw the altar with the sacred fire, the arms—bows and arrows, sword and shield—hung up in one corner and in the centre Rama and Sita and Lakshmana seated on blades of kusa grass. Bharata ran and fell prostrate at the feet of Rama weeping and crying, "O my brother, O my brother." He could not say a word more. Satrughna also did the same. Rama now lifted up his brothers, embraced them and kissed them on the head and asked, "Why did

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you leave our father and come to the forest? Is he well? Are all well at Ayodhya? Is everything going on well in the kingdom?"

"Father is no more, O Rama," cried Bharata in reply, "he died a few days after you left. I was away at my uncle's. I was sent for by Vasishtha. What have I to do with Ayodhya, or the kingdom of Kosala while you are here? You are the king and we are all your servants. You should take the place of father. That is our family tradition. Come, let us go to Ayodhya. We must see you crowned at once."

But these words were lost on Rama. He sat like one dazed when he heard of his father's death. His sorrow was too deep for tears. Sita and Lakshmana were alarmed when they saw his state. They quickly rose and sprinkled cold water on his face and helped him to lie down. After he recovered from his stupor, he began to sob again, "I am the cause of his death. And I have not done my duty by him as a son. O Bharata and Satrughna, you have done yours. Let us go at once to the Mandakini, O Lakshmana, and bathe and pour libations of water and give offerings to the dead. That is all that we can do now. Let Sita lead the way and we shall follow. That is the proper form." They accordingly went and bathed

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in the water. They poured libations of water on the sand invoking the spirit of Dasaratha and placed on the kusa grass their offerings of moist ingudi flour mixed with the juice of badari fruit. As they did so, they thought of the departed soul and wept and wailed that such poor offerings should be given to one who had been a king. The mourners then returned home in their wet clothes.

By this time Vasishtha had led the queens to the Mandakini on their way to Rama's abode. They too wept to see the poor offerings left by the mourners on the kusa grass. "What we eat we offer to our gods", exclaimed Kausalya. "So this is the food that my son eats in the forest." She could not proceed any further on the way and sat on the ground and bewailed the fate of her son as she had bewailed it a hundred times before in her palace. With great difficulty Vasishtha persuaded her to rise and go to the hermitage still at some distance off to meet Rama. When she reached the gate, Rama rushed out and fell prostrate in the dust before her, and she took him in her arms, kissed him on the head and passed her hand over his body removing the straw and the dust clinging to him. And when Sita came out, Kausalya exclaimed, "Oh! how thin and emaciated you are, my child! What a life for the daughter of King Janaka and the

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daughter-in-law of the king of Kosala!" The sorrow of the queens of Dasaratha was not, however, unmixed with joy at this reunion of the royal family in the hermitage at Chitrakuta. They had many things to speak about and went on conversing till midnight when they retired for rest.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE real business of their meeting commenced the next morning, when Bharata began to urge that Rama should return to Ayodhya with the army and be crowned king of Kosala. He gave several reasons for his request. It was the unanimous desire of the people. It was the desire of the three widowed queens including Kaikeyi, whose folly was the cause of his exile. It had also been the desire of Dasaratha, whose noble plan of crowning Rama during his own lifetime was frustrated. Bharata also swore that he was entirely innocent of the vile plot of his mother. He confessed that he was too weak to bear the burden of the kingdom thus thrust on him. If Rama insisted that the kingdom was Bharata's and not his on account of the promise he had given, Bharata would now hand it over to Rama of his own free will.

But Rama remained unconvinced. He stood like a rock against all appeals and arguments. His position was that he had solemnly promised Dasaratha and Kaikeyi that he would give the kingdom to Bharata and go into exile for fourteen years. He would not budge from that position. His Dharma in the circumstances in which he was placed was as clear to him as daylight.

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Then a Brahmana, by name Jabali, who had come with Vasishtha, began to argue with Rama saying that what he called Dharma was a mere superstition, that God, religion and morality were the mere invention of priests and that we should be guided in all our actions not by any notions of what is right and just, but by our notions of what is pleasant and comfortable to us. The enjoyment of a kingdom was a tangible and immediate pleasure. It should not be given up in favour of the doubtful happiness of a heaven which Rama probably hoped to gain by sticking to truth. There was no heaven, no hell and no other world than this. Man's life was short and it was foolish to forgo its pleasures for the sake of such illusions as truth or righteousness.

Rama listened to him patiently and said, "I am sorry that my father entertained at his court such a false Brahmana as you. From your own words it is clear you are an atheist. From time immemorial, gods and Rishis, our scriptures and traditions have all declared that Truth is the foundation of the universe that Truth is God, and that Truth should be followed at all costs. I hold that Truth is higher than all rites and ceremonies, than all gifts and charities, than

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all *tapas* and worship. Kings and rulers, more than other men, should set the example of following Truth without caring for consequences. For sovereignty, which is an attribute of God, is conferred on some men, not for the enjoyment of wealth and power, but for the maintenance and extension of Dharma. Dharma is not a superstition. Dharma is not an idle dream. Dharma is not the invention of priests. Dharma is the will of God. It is eternal. It is inviolable. It is the surest way to the goal of man. I am more concerned with leading men along this way than with ruling the kingdom of Kosala. I have given my word that I will step aside and allow Bharata to succeed to the kingdom and I must and will keep it."

The vehemence of Rama disconcerted them all. Vasishtha however came to the rescue of Jabali and said that his friend was not an atheist, but only used atheistic arguments to induce Rama to go back to Ayodhya. " Listen to me, O Prince " continued Vasishtha, " I am your family preceptor and priest. It is because we believe that the cause of Dharma will be better served by your ruling the kingdom of Kosala and guiding your subjects along the ways of truth and righteousness than by remaining unknown in the forest that we are so importunate that you should return to Ayodhya. Is it not also your

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Dharma to please your mother and be a source of comfort to her in her old age? Is it not your Dharma that you should relieve your brother of his burden, which he says he is unable to bear?"

"It is no doubt my Dharma to do all this, O learned Guru," replied Rama, "but a higher Dharma prevents me from doing it. Truth is the highest Dharma. I have first of all to be true to my word before I can please my mother or relieve my brother or satisfy my subjects."

Thus Rama had an answer ready for all the arguments they could think of. He was unassailable. So Bharata grew desperate and said that he would lie across the threshold of Rama's hermitage and fast to death if his brother did not grant his prayer. He accordingly laid himself down and appealed to the citizens of Ayodhya who had come with him and were witnessing the scene to intercede on his behalf. But they said they knew Rama too well to hope to turn him from what he considered his Dharma. And Rama asked Bharata to get up from that posture which was unbecoming of a Kshatriya prince. At this juncture Vasishtha suggested a compromise. Let Rama remain in the forest for fourteen years according to his vow and let Bharata hold the kingdom in trust for Rama

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and act as his agent in his absence. This was agreed to by all. Thereupon Bharata begged Rama for his sandals, so that he might place them on the throne as symbols of sovereignty, while he carried on the affairs of the kingdom as his brother's agent.

"And remember," said Bharata as he received them, "the period of my trusteeship is strictly limited. It is fourteen years from the day you left Ayodhya. If on the first day of the fifteenth year I do not see you in Ayodhya—well, you will not hear any more of Bharata."

"Agreed", said Rama embracing his brother. "And may I give you this parting advice, my beloved brother? Do not blame your mother Kaikeyi, I pray. Never be angry with her for what has taken place. Treat her always respectfully. This is what my wife and I beg of you. Farewell, dear brother."

Thus ended this famous meeting of the two brothers at Chitrakuta. Bharata returned to Ayodhya in a solemn procession bearing the holy sandals of Rama on his head. On the appointed day he placed them on the throne and the coronation of Rama's sandals was celebrated throughout Kosala. And, as Ayodhya had become too much of a deserted city and too full of painful associations

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for Bharata, he withdrew to Nandigrama, a village on the outskirts of the capital, and conducted from there the affairs of the State as the agent of his brother. He strictly followed the ascetic rule of life and anxiously awaited the termination of his long period of trusteeship.

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PART II—A Romance

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Bharata and the queen-mothers departed from Chitrakuta, the place lost all its former attractions for Rama. Moreover its scenery was spoiled by the camping of Bharata's huge army. So Rama and Sita, accompanied by Lakshmana, left Chitrakuta, where they had spent some of the happiest days of their lives and moved south visiting the various ashramas of Rishis in the forest and admiring the beauty of holiness cherished there. The first ashrama they visited after they left Chitrakuta was that of the celebrated sage Atri and his equally celebrated wife Anasuya. The princes were greatly pleased to hear the sage recount the greatness of his wife and bowed to her as directed by him. The holy woman received Sita as her own daughter and presented her with gifts which would ensure her future happiness.

But, as the princes proceeded south, they found the tropical woods gloomier and more impenetrable and infested with monsters of various kinds. They had not wandered far before they had a foretaste of

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the troubles in store for them. They saw a huge and dreadful monster coming towards them holding in his hand a long pike, from which were dangling the bleeding carcasses of a number of wild animals he had killed for his breakfast. As soon as he sighted the princes, he ran towards them and throwing his pike on the ground seized Sita by force and said that he would make her his wife and would drink the blood of her two companions. He announced himself as Viradha the son of Jaya and declared that he had performed *tapas* and obtained a boon from the gods that he could not be killed with any weapon. He asked Rama and Lakshmana, if they cared for their lives, to run away from the place at once leaving Sita to him. The princes saw the terrible predicament in which Sita was and began to discharge such sharp arrows against the monster that they penetrated his body and fell on the other side followed by jets of blood. Viradha now became enraged, and placing Sita on the ground for a while, rushed on Rama and Lakshmana and seizing them with either hand ran away bellowing into the wood. Sita followed crying aloud. But, fortunately, the princes were able within a short time to cut off the monster's arms with their swords and jump on the ground. The monster now fell down and instantly the princes were on his prostrate

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body hammering him with their knees and fists and thrusting their swords into him. They remembered that, on account of the boon he had obtained, he could not be killed with any weapon. So Lakshmana dug a pit for him while Rama held him down by his throat. They wanted to bury him alive. Viradha, now at death's door, remembered who he was in his former life and why his soul came to be imprisoned in a Rakshasa body He informed the princes that he had been a Gandharva, the servant of Kubera. His name was Tumburu. His master had punished him for neglect of duty and ordered he should go down to the earth and lead a monster's life in a monster's body till he should be released by Rama and Lakshmana, who would bury him alive. So he welcomed the burial, as thereby he would regain his former status. Before the earth finally covered his monstrous body, he directed the princes to go to the hermitage of a Rishi called Sarabhanga living about ten miles from that place.

Accordingly after Sita recovered from her fright, the princes turned their steps to the ashrama of Sarabhanga. They were welcomed there by the sage who, knowing by his yogic powers that they were coming, had postponed his departure to heaven to extend the hospitality of his hermitage

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to them. They remained there a day, and after Sarabhanga quitted his body, went to the hermitage of another Rishi, by name Sutikshna. On the way a large body of hermits living in the neighbouring tracts met Rama and sought his protection against the Rakshasas of the forest who used to molest them and desecrate their hermitages. The prince promised these holy men that he would do his utmost to clear the forest of all evil-doers. Sita was a little alarmed at the promise that Rama gave. She gently remonstrated with her husband and said that bearing arms would always be a temptation for violence and that therefore he would do well to follow the ascetic rule of life while living among the ascetics of the forest. But Rama pointed out that his bearing arms was for defence and not for offence. It was for protecting the unoffending holy sages against the wanton violence of the Rakshasas. It was for maintaining Dharma, not for violating it.

And Rama was as good as his word. For, after he left the hermitage of Sutikshna, he spent ten years of his exile visiting the ashramas of these holy men and spending some months with each of them and giving them the protection they required. Some of the hermitages he visited more than once according to the needs of the inmates. His presence

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scared away all evil-doers from that region and for ten long years the life of the princes was uneventful. They were quite happy going from one ashrama to another, enjoying the hospitality of the sages, listening to their discourses and gaining great spiritual experience from contact with them. At the end of this period they were curious to see the far-famed Agastya, whose hermitage was still further south. Directed by Sutikshna, whom they had visited a second time, they went about fifty miles south and reached the hermitages of Agastya and of his brother Sudarsana. The great sage welcomed them and presented Rama with an extra-ordinary bow and arrows and a sword which he had obtained from the gods. Rama thankfully received these gifts and requested the sage to direct him to a retired spot where he could live at peace with Sita and Lakshmana for the rest of his period of exile. Agastya thought awhile and suggested to him a place called "Panchavati" about two yojanas from his hermitage.

"It is a beautiful place", said the sage, "not far from here. It is on the banks of the Godavari. It is well-wooded and has abundant fruit. I am sure Sita would like it".

The princes then took leave of Agastya, and went in the direction of Panchavati. On the way,

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they saw a huge vulture and thought he was a Rakshasa of the place. But he spoke with human voice and said, "O Rama, know me as a friend of Dasaratha, your father". The princes then enquired his name and lineage and were told that his name was Jatayu and that he and his brother Sampati were the sons of Aruna, the brother of Garuda. "This forest is full of wild beasts and monsters," continued Jatayu. "I will be of help to you in protecting the young Princess. Whenever you brothers go out to seek food, I will take care of her." Rama was pleased to meet a friend of his father in the wild forest and gratefully accepted his proferred help.

The princes then continued their journey and reached the place indicated by Agastya. They found it suitable and Rama selected a spot where they could build an ashrama for themselves.

"Here the place is level amidst these flowering trees," said Rama. "On one side there is that pond full of fragrant lotuses, and on the other is the beautiful Godavari—on whose banks I see flocks of hamsas, karandavas and chakravakas. And not far from here are those wooded hills where salas, talas, tamalas and kharjuras seem to grow in profusion. This is an ideal place for us, O Lakshmana. Let us build a hermitage and live the rest of our time here."

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So said Rama, not knowing what was in store for him here. He hoped that Panchavati would be another Chitrakuta, where he had spent a very happy time before Bharata came with a large army to request him to return to Ayodhya. He was quite happy for some time. He used to go with Sita and Lakshmana early in the morning to bathe in the Godavari and do his sandhya worship there. Especially in the winter months of Pushya and Magha, when light mists hung upon the trees and drops of dew lay like pearls upon the grass, they loved to go into the woods at sun-rise and listen to the sweet notes of kraunchas and sarasas. They loved to wander in the warm sunshine and observe the wild elephants shrinking from touching the cold water in the pools with their trunks, while the water-birds sat on the sandy margin afraid of entering the waters. The two brothers would often remember Bharata in their wanderings, and wonder whether he would be bathing in the Sarayu, as they were bathing in the Godavari, and whether he would be enjoying the warmth of the winter sun in Ayodhya, as they were doing at Panchavati. Mention of Bharata would lead to the mention of Kaikeyi. And Lakshmana as usual would be harsh about her. But Rama would check him. He would not hear a word said against the queen.

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" Speak to me about Bharata, O Lakshmana," he would say, " but not a word against our mother. I can never forget the words of Bharata at Chitrakuta. For his sake, I am now and then tempted to go back to Ayodhya. But not now. Our banishment is drawing to a close. At the end of it we shall return, and we shall all be happy as of old ".

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CHAPTER X

BUT the very next day an incident happened at Panchavati which brought in its train untold suffering to Sita and many a weary day of mental anguish to Rama and Lakshmana. As they were sitting in their hermitage after their morning ablutions and prayers in the Godavari, there came into their presence a hideous old Rakshasa woman, copper-haired, squint-eyed and pot-bellied, and with a harsh and grating voice. She stood before Rama and asked him who he was and why he had come with his wife to the forest. Rama told her briefly the facts of his life and asked in turn who she was and why she had come there.

She replied, " I am Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, the king of the Rakshasas, of whom you may have heard. I have five brothers. The first is Ravana, the second is Kumbhakarna who sleeps for months together, the third is Vibhishana who is unlike a Rakshasa in character and the fourth and fifth are Khara and Dooshana, terrible in battle. Wandering along in this forest, as is my wont, I saw you from a distance and fell in love with you. I desire you for a husband. What have you to do with this Sita? She is not fit for you. I am the woman for you. Come and be my husband. I want

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you. I want you, indeed. I will eat up these two companions of yours and then we will wander at our pleasure in this forest."

Rama was too amused to be angry with her. Smiling he said, "You see, gentle lady, I am married, and my wife is here. But there is my brother Lakshmana. He has not got his wife with him. He is young and handsome. He is the man for you. Approach him, O fair one."

Surpanakha accordingly turned to the younger brother and said, "Come, sir, make me your wife, and let us wander in the forest of Dandaka and enjoy ourselves."

"It is not proper, O lotus-eyed lady," replied Lakshmana, "that you should become the slave of a slave. I am Rama's slave and not an independent man. He is my master and he can afford to have two wives. You might ask him to take you as his junior wife. He is too sensible to reject the offer of a lady of such surpassing beauty."

The wretched monster once again turned to Rama, but this time with flaming eyes, and said, "You are discourteous to me in the presence of this woman. I will now devour her before your very eyes. Then you will have no choice left but to accept me."

So saying, she pounced upon Sita like a wild beast and would have destroyed her, had not

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Lakshmana, in response to the cry of Rama, swiftly intervened, sword in hand, and cut off her nose and ears, sparing her life. The monster, thus foiled, roared in pain and, with streaming blood, ran away into the woods to seek her brother Khara and devise vengeance against her enemies.

In a short time she returned with fourteen Rakshasas and pointed out to them the place where Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were sitting. They came near and hurled their lances at the princes. But Rama, who had seen the Rakshasas coming, was ready to meet them and discharged in quick succession fourteen arrows which broke their lances to pieces before they reached him. And while the warriors were recovering from their surprise he shot another batch of fourteen arrows which went straight to their throats and laid all the fourteen low.

Thus foiled a second time, Surpanakha ran again to Janasthana, which was an outpost of Ravana in the Dandaka forest, where he had stationed his brothers Khara and Dooshana with a large army. Khara was beside himself with anger when he heard of the death of the fourteen whom he had sent against Rama and immediately ordered fourteen thousand of his army to march against the enemy with all their chariots, horses and elephants.

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He also asked his brother Dooshana and all the other generals to accompany him.

When Rama saw the army coming he knew that a terrible battle was imminent and asked Lakshmana to conduct Sita to a place of safety—a mountain cave not far from the hermitage—and remain there guarding her till the fight was over. He was confident he could meet the Rakshasa force single-handed.

" Quick, Lakshmana," said he. " Don't say a word. I know you too can deal with the foe single-handed. But obey me and lead Sita at once."

When they had left, he put on his armour, took his bow and arrows and was ready to meet the foe. The army came and first discharged a shower of arrows. But Rama struck them all down, and with unerring precision let fly his shining arrows against the throats of the charioteers, mahouts and horsemen and killed them all. Some of the Rakshasas were frightened at this swift destruction and began to flee. But Dooshana, who was in command, called them back in anger and ordered them to attack Rama on all sides with swords or clubs or stones or whatever else they could lay their hands on. Accordingly with a deafening cry they charged against him with various kinds of missiles, only to be cut down by the arrows which came in large

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numbers from his bow in every direction. The Rakshasas could see neither the bow nor the bowstring in the hands of the warrior. They saw only arrows coming straight at their throats and laying them low in the twinkling of an eye. In a few minutes there were no charging heroes round Rama, but only heaps of turbaned heads, mutilated hands and legs and splinters of arrows and chariot wheels and heaps of dying horses. But Dooshana did not lose heart. He ordered his reserves—five thousand of them—to march to the front and continue the battle without interruption. And while Rama was countering their missiles with his arrows Dooshana himself charged against the hero with an iron club in his hand. But Rama deftly turned two of his arrows against the Rakshasa and cut off both his arms at the shoulders. Dooshana fell down with his club, never to rise again. The reserves he had called into action soon shared his fate. Khara was now roused to fury and ordered his twelve generals to go together and attack Rama with what troops they could muster from the field. They accordingly rushed on him with sword and shield, but found him a match for them all. Their swords were broken, their shields were struck down and their throats were pierced with arrows against which nothing could stand. At last there were only three

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left on the battle-filed—Khara and Trisiras on one side and Rama on the other. Mad with anger at seeing the destruction of his army, Khara rushed against his foe. But Trisiras intervened and stopped his leader begging for a chance for himself to deal with the enemy. The leader consented. Trisiras now drove his chariot and faced Rama and shot three sharp arrows, which hit him on his forehead and drew blood. Nothing daunted, the hero replied with fourteen shining arrows, which went like flaming serpents from his bow and put an end to the Rakshasa, chariot and all. Khara was now left alone. His heart sank for a moment. But he soon gained courage and thought that Rama might be exhausted by now and fall an easy victim to his weapons. So he desperately turned his chariot and drove against the enemy and, before Rama was aware, discharged a sharp arrow and cut his bow into two. The hero was surprised, and before he could take another bow, seven arrows came from the enemy and broke his armour to pieces. His body was now exposed. Khara took advantage of this and sent arrow after arrow which pierced Rama in his arms and chest and in some of the vital parts. But the hero shook them off in a moment and took up the great bow which Agastya had presented to him and discharged in quick succession thirteen

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arrows, which killed Khara's horses and his charioteer and broke the bow in his hand. The Rakshasa now jumped out of his broken chariot with an iron mace in his hand and turned on his enemy. The two warriors were now face to face.

"Come on, do your worst," cried Rama, "I will soon send you to the place where your followers have gone. And the souls of the Rishis whom you have molested and slain in these forests will rejoice in heaven. Infernal brood of Rakshasa reptiles, I have come to make a clean sweep of you."

"Oh! what a heaven-sent braggart have we here," said Khara with a hideous ironical laugh. "No real hero ever praises himself as you do, my little fellow. Your boasts only betray your character. Come, let us not waste words. I have to avenge the death of all these lying around me."

So saying the Rakshasa hurled his mace against Rama. But Rama's arrows met the dreadful weapon half way and broke it into splinters. Khara now bit his lip and having uprooted a tree threw it at the face of his enemy. The tree shared the fate of the mace. Rama then took the offensive and pursued his foe with very sharp and piercing arrows. Khara, unable to bear the pain, made a mad rush at Rama. And the latter stepped back a little, and taking one of those unfailing arrows that

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had been presented to him by Agastya, discharged it with great presence of mind straight at the heart of the Rakshasa. Khara now fell vomiting blood, and the fight was over.

The battle had lasted for an hour and a quarter. Sita and Lakshmana had been watching it with intense emotion from their cave. And now, when the last Rakshasa had fallen, Sita ran to her husband and embraced him with tears of joy in her eyes, saying again and again. " This scene I will never forget to the end of my life."

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CHAPTER XI

WHEN Surpanakha came to know of the slaughter of the forces that had marched against Rama from Janasthana, she was terror-stricken and flew at once to her brother Ravana, the king of Lanka, to instigate him against her enemies. Ravana was surprised to see his sister mutilated and breathlessly asked for the cause. The wily woman first reproached him with his ignorance of the fate of Khara and Dooshana and said that a king who had not yet known through his spies the destruction of all his frontier forces headed by his two brothers was not fit to rule his kingdom. Having thus communicated to him the alarming news, she began to relate the circumstances in which she had lost her nose and ears. With wily impudence she said that, when she saw Sita, one of the most beautiful women in the world, accompanying her husband Rama in the forest, she thought of enticting her to desert the prince who had lost his kingdom and become the wife of the illustrious king of Lanka feared by gods and men. She would have succeeded in her attempts, had not Lakshmana, the cruel brother of Rama, discovered the plot and mutilated her. She then narrated how she went to Khara and Dooshana, how they marched against the prince of Ayodhya to avenge

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her wrongs and how the whole army was slaughtered by a single man. The best way of punishing Rama was, she said, to carry away to Lanka his beautiful wife, of whom he was so fond. He would then die of grief, as he would never know where she was, and even if he knew, he could never cross the thousand miles of sea between Lanka and the mainland. Thus instigated by Surpanakha and actuated both by his sensuality and by his love of revenge, Ravana started secretly in his chariot from his capital taking counsel of nobody. He had formed a plan in his own evil mind for carrying out his object. He crossed the sea and first went to the ashrama of Maricha, the well-known Rakshasa, who had been twice vanquished by Rama and who, as a consequence, repenting of his evil ways, had been making penance for his past life. Ravana disclosed his plan to him and asked for his help and cooperation, thinking that he was the same old Maricha that had been an adept in Rakshasa witchcraft. The long reply that Maricha gave was characteristic of his new life.

" It is easy for you, O king," he said, " to meet with counsellors who tell you what is pleasant to you, but rarely do you meet with those who tell you what is unpleasant, but beneficial to you. I tell you, you do not know this prince of Ayodhya,

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against whom you are plotting. The information you have got about him is absolutely false and misleading. He has not been driven out of the kingdom by his father, as you say. He voluntarily chose to be an exile to make his father keep some promises he had made. You say he is cruel and has killed many thousands of your followers. But he has killed them either in self-defence or in defence of the innocent Rishis whom your followers had been molesting. No, no. He is not cruel, he is not false, he is not wicked, he is not lascivious. He is the very opposite of these. Somebody has misled you. I know Rama well. I bear on my body and on my soul the marks of his arrows. When he was only a boy of twelve he was brought by the sage Viswamitra to guard his hermitage against our attacks. His arrows on that occasion hurled me far into the sea and killed my companions. This was years ago when Rama had not yet learnt all the secrets of warfare. Recently, only a few years ago, I encountered him in the forests of Dandaka, where he was wandering with Sita and Lakshmana. I had not left my evil ways. I and two of my companions had assumed the forms of horned deer and were molesting the Rishis of the forest, killing them and eating their flesh. As soon as I saw Rama, I remembered the old enmity, and

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thinking that the forest-life must have sapped his strength ran against him with my friends to trample him to death. But I soon learnt the lesson of my life. For in the twinkling of an eye the hero discharged three arrows from his bow. My companions fell down dead at once. And I ran and ran as I never did before in the forest with the winged arrow whistling behind my ear. At last I fell down unconscious miles away from where Rama stood. For several days afterwards I had a strange experience. In every bush and in every thicket, I saw a Rama standing and pointing his arrow at me. I saw him behind every tree in the forest and behind every rock on the mountains. And when I escaped from there to an open plain, I saw thousands of Ramas standing there all pointing their arrows at me. It was the same in sleep. I would dream of him and him alone and rise from my bed with a startled cry. This dread of Rama and his arrows left me only when I took a vow that I would not molest the Rishis of the forest any longer, that I would turn my back on my evil ways and that I would lead a new life of virtue and devotion. Rama has thus vanquished my sinful self and I am grateful to him. So, be advised. Take it from me that the prince of Ayodhya is not an ordinary man. Some irresistible divine power is at work in that

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radiant human form. The princess is equally divine, if not more so. I have never seen, either among the gods in heaven or among the denizens of the earth below, anything more beautiful than the love which the prince and princess bear towards each other. You see it in their looks, hear it in their words and feel it in every motion of theirs. We Rakshasas know nothing of love. We have only desires and appetites. She is dearer to Rama than his own life. If you molest her in anyway, as you propose to do, I am certain Rama's flaming wrath will descend not only on you and your family, but also on all that island empire of yours. The Rakshasas will all be wiped out of the earth. If you want to doom them to destruction you may persist in carrying out this plan. But don't make me a party to it. I will have nothing to do with it. You see I have turned over a new leaf in my life and have constructed this ashrama where I will spend the rest of my days in peace."

The king of the Rakshasas laughed bitterly and said, "I have asked for your help, O Maricha, not your advice. My mind is already made up. I am not here to listen to the counsels of cowardice. Remember you are my subject and owe obedience to me. Your life is in my hands. You may have escaped from Rama by the strength of your legs. But

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you cannot escape me, the king of the Rakshasas. Come, do as I bid you. I will unfold my plan so that you may know exactly what you have to do. You are a master of witchcraft. You can't pretend ignorance now. You have to assume the enchanting form of a golden deer with silver spots all over the body and go and pretend to be grazing innocently beside the hermitage of Rama in the forest. When Sita sees you, you should frisk and gambol about, showing off the beauty of your skin. She will then naturally ask her husband to fetch her that strange and beautiful creature for a pet. When he comes to catch you, you should jump and leap and evade him, and when he makes a more vigorous attempt you should run so as to make him pursue you. Having thus taken him away from the hermitage a considerable distance, you should cry aloud imitating Rama's voice, 'Alas, O Lakshmana, O Sita'. After that you may go your way. Hearing the cry Lakshmana would rush out, from the hermitage to rescue his brother, leaving Sita alone. I will then take advantage of their absence and carry away Sita. Thus my object would be fulfilled without an armed assault or a regular battle".

"It is better for me to receive death at Rama's than yours, O King", said Maricha. "Come,

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let us go. Both of us are doomed, and Lanka too. The very sight of Rama is death for me, and the capture of Sita will be death for you and destruction for Lanka. The doomed, like the dead, have no ears. They cannot listen to advice. Come, let us go. Where is your chariot? "

" You are now the old Maricha ", said Ravana taking his hand and leading him out of the hermitage. " Till now even your voice was different. Now it is all right. I am glad you have consented to play your part. Here is my chariot. Get in ".

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CHAPTER XII

THEY flew past many villages and towns and entered the forest of Dandaka. When at last they reached Panchavati, they got down and each went his way. Maricha, according to Ravana's instructions, assumed the form of a deer of wonderful shape and colours. The horns of this magic creature shone like jewels tipped with gems. Its head was dappled grey, its mouth was partly crimson and partly blue. Its ears were sapphire and its throat was turquoise. Its belly was white like jessamine, its sides were golden yellow, the colour of a madhuka flower or the filaments of a lotus, and all over its body gleamed starry spots of pearly hue. Its legs were long and slender and its joints firm. Its hoofs shone like *lapis lazuli*, and its tail flashed with all the colours of the rainbow.

The magic deer played for a while amidst bushes and trees. But when it joined the herd of forest deer grazing in the valley, they came near and sniffed and ran away frightened in all directions. So it turned warily and went near the bushes where Sita was humming a tune as she gathered the flowers of the forest near the hermitage. When her eyes fell on the magic deer she was captivated by its beauty and cried aloud to

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Rama and Lakshmana to come out and see the wonderful creature. They came looking out in all directions, and Sita, pointing to the animal, cried with delight. "Look, what beauty, what splendour, what colours! See how it leaps and bites off the tender shoots! What a tongue of fire! I have never seen the like of this creature before. Can't you get it for me? I will make it my pet. And we will take it to Ayodhya when we go back at the end of the year. It will be an ornament to our palace. Oh, do get it for me, alive or dead. Don't allow it to escape. Oh, what a lovely skin it has of gold and silver!"

The two brothers gazed with wonder at the animal as it frisked and gamboled in the green grass and as its colours flashed in the sunlight. "It is a wonderful creature," said Rama. "We have not seen anything like this in all our wanderings in the forest all these thirteen years. We must catch it, Lakshmana, as Sita is so delighted with it and wants it."

"It is too wonderful to be true," observed Lakshmana. "I suspect it is that notorious wizard Maricha in the form of a deer. He often assumes the forms of forest creatures and deceives the hunters and finally kills them. He has not been coming into the forest for some years now. I

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suspect he is at his old tricks again. So let us be careful."

"If he is old Maricha", said Rama, "it is all the greater reason why we should pursue him and catch him alive or dead. The forest will then be cleared of one of the most dangerous of the Rakshasas. The creature is getting away. I will go after it, Lakshmana. You had better take Sita into the hermitage and guard her till I come back. If it is Maricha, as you say, there may be other Rakshasas about. So don't leave the hermitage, whatever happens, till I come back. It is not safe to leave Sita alone."

So saying Rama parted from Sita and never saw her till after many a weary month of sorrow and suffering for both. Lakshmana conducted the princess into the hermitage, her lap full of the flowers she had gathered. Scarcely had they pushed the gate and entered when a long agonising cry fell on their ears. It was like Rama's voice, exclaiming, "Alas, O Sita, O Lakshmana." Sita was thunderstruck. It was her husband's voice and no mistake. The cry ended in a wail. Something had happened. Was he in danger of his life? She wrung her hands, scattering on the ground the flowers in her lap, and cried, "O Lakshmana, what is this? Fly, fly, fly to your

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brother and see that he is safe. Don't stay, go at once. Why are you hesitating?."

"Don't be alarmed, O Princess", replied Lakshmana. "It is all the doing of that Rakshasa, Maricha. Rama would never cry like that. Who is there in the world that can vanquish my brother? Did you not see his battle with Khara and Dooshana?"

"But it is my husband's voice. Don't I know it?" remonstrated Sita. "He is calling you and me. Do run to him, sir, don't stay arguing with me."

Lakshmana once more tried to pacify the excited princess, saying that he was certain it was all Maricha's deceit, that Rama was in no danger at all and that in any case it was unsafe to leave her alone in the wild forest and that Rama had bidden him not to leave the place till he came back. The princess was by now thoroughly unnerved and was beside herself with suspense, sorrow and anger. Intense love towards her husband, along with unbounded admiration for him, was the mainstay of her life. It was the backbone of her personality. Therefore when she found herself helpless during those agonising moments when she imagined he was in danger of his life, her passion burst forth in cruel taunts against Lakshmana who had refused to go to the rescue of his brother. She accused him

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of faithlessness, of conspiracy against his brother and even of designs on her virtue. Lakshmana was stunned. He said at first. " You are a goddess. I dare not reply." But he railed against women in general, protested his innocence and invoked the dryads of the wood to guard the princess and reluctantly went out to do her bidding.

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CHAPTER XIII

LAKSHMANA was soon out of sight. Sita was alone and quite exhausted after her outburst of passion. Ravana now saw his opportunity. He was waiting invisible in the vicinity of the hermitage. He had heard the cry of Maricha and the angry scene that followed and the departing footsteps of Lakshmana. "Everything is going according to plan," he murmured to himself. And the high gods in heaven knew and echoed his words, "Yes. Everything is going according to plan. The giant mouse is going near its trap of death."

Ravana now assumed the guise of a Sanyasin, and, equipped with wooden sandals, staff and waterpot and clothed in orange-coloured garments, entered the hermitage chanting the Veda. Sita was still sitting and weeping disconsolately. Ravana asked her who she was and why she was alone in a forest infested with wild beasts and haunted by evil-minded Rakshasas. She rose to receive the holy man, offered him a seat, gave him water with which he could wash his feet and placed before him what forest fare she had in the hermitage. She then answered his questions and briefly told him the story of Rama's banishment and of their wanderings in the forest. All the while she was glancing

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at the gate to see whether Rama and Lakshmana were returning home. But there were no signs of their coming. There was instead a strange stillness in the air. The wind had ceased to blow. The natural sounds of the forest seemed to be dead. Even the noise of the flowing water in the Godavari was not heard. Having answered all his questions, Sita now in her turn asked the Sanyasin who he was and how long he had been living in the forest. The Sanyasin now rose from his seat and throwing off his guise declared, " I am Ravana, the king of Lanka and the terror of all the worlds." He then proposed to the startled princess that she might fly with him and be his chief queen in Lanka and have all the luxuries in the world at her command rather than follow the beggar Prince of Ayodhya in those pathless woods. He said, " If you become the queen of Lanka, O Princess, there will be at your beck and call five thousand slaves attending to every want of yours. Come, I have a flying chariot ready for you. Leave this beggar Prince to his asceticism and his forest fare. There is no comparison between me and him."

At these insulting words Sita's spirit was roused. Magnificent in her courage she faced Ravana like an angry lioness and burst out, " Yes, what comparison is there between Him and you?

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My husband is a lion. You are a jackal: He is like an elephant. You are like a cat. What comparison is there between an ocean and a puddle, between the nectar of the gods and the water in a ditch? What? Dare you raise your eyes to the Princess of Ayodhya, the spouse of Rama? And dare you speak these words to me? What? Would you, O vile Rakshasa, draw the fangs out of a cobra's mouth, would you drink poison, would you lick a razor with your tongue, or draw a needle across your eye? It is far safer for you to do these than to assail or tempt Rama's wife." Sita was now trembling with anger like a plantain tree in a storm. Her words roused the dreaded monster only to a greater effort to captivate her mind. He began to narrate his great exploits, his battles against the gods and demons and his victories in the three worlds. He spoke of his high adventure with the demigod Kubera, his own step-brother, from whom he had wrested the kingdom of Lanka, and with it his wonderful aerial car Pushpaka, both of which, together with all his possessions, he said, he would place at the disposal of Sita, if she accepted him.

" Are you not ashamed, you vile sinner," cried Sita impetuously, "of claiming kinship with Kubera, one of the guardian deities of this world? Your

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wickedness, cruelty and sensuality will bring you only utter destruction in the end. You may boast of your victories for a short time. But wide-spread ruin is the end of all such as you. In coming near me you are only putting your hand into fire. I warn you, begone, before my husband returns and sends you to the abode of Yama, the god of death."

Ravana now struck his hands and assumed his own dreadful form discarding that of a Sanyasin. He seized the princess by the hair, and, before she knew what was happening, he carried her off to the chariot waiting behind the hermitage. She shrieked and struggled and kicked. She screamed for help and cried, "O Rama, O Lakshmana, where are you? I am being taken away by this wicked Rakshasa. Come, come at once and kill him and rescue me." But it was all in vain. Rama and Lakshmana were far away. Her cries could not reach them. She tried desperately to jump out of the chariot, but Ravana held her down and thundered to the charioteer, "Fly, fly." The princess hoped for a moment that the chariot might go in the direction in which her husband had gone. But what were her surprise and bewilderment when the chariot rose into mid air and the strange beasts that bore the yoke began to cleave

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the air with their dark legs! She looked in all directions. The forest trees were soon far below. The chariot was flying south. Her mind began to whirl. And yet she shouted to the trees and the hills and the river in the neighbourhood, " O green karnikara trees growing in Janasthana, tell my husband, I pray you, that I am being carried away by Ravana. O lofty flower-scented Prasravana, you see how I am being carried away by Ravana. Tell my husband, I beg of you. O Godavari, I bow to you, sacred river, will you not murmur in my Rama's ears as you flow, how you saw Ravana carry me away?" She then turned fiercely on her assailant and hurled insult on insult against him. " Vile robber, shameless thief, you broke into my house when I was alone and seized me when I was helpless. And you are now running away, you coward, lest my husband should come and break your head. A brave exploit for the king of the Rakshasas to molest an innocent woman when her husband is not by! Stay but a few minutes in the forest, and you will never get out of it alive. For my husband and his brother will come and send you to Yama, the god of death."

Her cries awoke Jatayu the vulture, who was sleeping on the top of a tree. He saw the aerial car coming with great speed and Sita wildly

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whirling her arms against Ravana who was seated motionless like a mountain. He grasped the situation at once and rose on his wings and obstructed the passage of the car. As soon as Sita sighted him, she cried, " O venerable Jatayu, look at me, I am being carried away by this wicked and heartless robber. No, no, don't try to assail him. He is armed and desperate. You are old and feeble. He will easily strike you down with his sword. Go and tell my husband. He is not far off He is somewhere in the wood. Tell him how in his absence I have been forcibly carried off by Ravana of Lanka. Tell him the direction in which this car is going."

But Jatayu would not listen to her advice. He poised himself right across the flying car and said to Ravana, " I am only a vulture, O foul demon, and yet I know and follow Dharma, which you have never done in your life. I can't allow you to commit this atrocious act of stealing the fair Princess of Ayodhya. She is the wife of that virtuous Prince, Rama, the son of Dasaratha, my old and esteemed friend. You may be strong and desperate and armed, as she says. And I may be old and feeble. But you must kill me before you can proceed a step further on your way to hell."

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So there ensued a battle between Jatayu and Ravana. The Rakshasa at first raised his bow and discharged a number of arrows at the obstructing vulture. The latter waved them aside with his wings and rushed upon Ravana, inflicting grievous wounds all over his body with his beak and talons. Ravana was taken unawares. Before he could recover from his surprise, Jatayu bore heavily on the charioteer and the horses and struck them dead. Ravana, with great presence of mind, threw off his bow and, taking Sita under his arm, alighted on the ground leaving the chariot to its fate. Jatayu also flew down rather exhausted by the exertion he had put forth. The Rakshasa now saw his opportunity for escaping and rose again into the air with Sita still struggling under his arm. But Jatayu would not allow him to escape. He pursued him and tore off his hair and gave a deep scratch on his neck. Ravana now saw he could not get away as long as the old vulture was alive. So he again alighted on the ground, placed Sita at the foot of a tree and faced the enemy with his sword drawn from its scabbard. Jatayu came down on him with outstretched wings to deal a stunning blow on his head. But Ravana quickly jumped up and cut off his wings, and so he fell down at the feet of Sita with a heavy thud, never

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more to rise. "O venerable Jatayu," wailed Sita, sitting by the bleeding bird and stroking his head, "you have fallen for my sake. Noble protector, how can I requite you? O gods in heaven, I commit him to your charge till my husband returns. O Rama and Lakshmana, come and see the champion who is dying here for my sake. O where are you? Are you yet ignorant of my fate? Have not the trees and hills I prayed to informed you of your loss?"

Then followed a pathetic scene. Ravana wiped his sword on the grass, returned it to its scabbard and approached his captive to take hold of her once again. The poor princess shrieking aloud ran into a thicket near by, as though it could afford her protection. And, when the demon quickly followed with his long strides, she ran from there to a neighbouring tree and entwined her arms round its trunk like a flowering creeper. Ravana came and pulled her away from the trunk, while all the trees of the forest stood trembling and the sun hid his face behind a cloud. He tucked the struggling princess under his arm once again and flew up into the sky like a rocket and resumed his journey. Her shrieks died on the air. But the flowers in her braid fell scattered on the ground like drops of rain. And presently, owing to the terrific speed of the

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demon, one of her anklets loosed itself from her foot and dropped down like a falling star. It was soon followed by her necklace of pearls which fell like a cascade from the sky. The demon never minding these flew in the air past many villages and towns. To the people below, the princess clad in fluttering yellow silk and struggling in the clutches of the black demon, looked like flashes of lightning breaking through a dark thunder-cloud fleeting across the sky. Sometimes, when the wind was high and the loose end of her saree was spread out in the sun, the flying monster looked like a mountain side on fire. And all the time in this perilous passage the poor princess was looking down on the earth with a pale face, like the moon piercing through a cloud, till at last her eyes fell on four stalwart ape-like persons sitting on the top of a hill. They were looking at the sky with unwinking eyes and wondering what this object was which was sailing so rapidly like a storm-driven cloud. A quick thought came into Sita's mind. In her struggles she had managed to unloose some of her jewels and tied them up into a bundle in a piece of cloth torn from her dress. Her intention was to throw them in some prominent place so as to provide a landmark for Rama and Lakshmana when they should come searching for her. Now when she saw four denizens of the

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wood sitting together apparently in consultation on a rock, she dropped the bundle of jewels in their midst as she flew over their heads. The bundle fell with a clang on the rock. But before they could recover from their surprise the demon had carried her away past the hill and the big lake which it overlooked. He now redoubled his speed, as he feared an attack from below, and flew like an arrow shot by a skilful bowman. At last he reached the sea. But he did not stop there. He continued his flight across the black waters till a white city with gleaming spires on the top of a hill came into view. Sita now gazed with terror and wonder at the broad marble-paved streets, the high palaces, the pleasure gardens, the innumerable fountains throwing up jets of water and crowds of Rakshasas, some walking, some riding and some driving their chariots with deafening cries. She had not seen anything like this after she had left Ayodhya. She thought it must be Lanka, the capital of Ravana. Her surmise proved to be correct, for now the demon alighted with his burden on the landing-place of a steep tower and carried her down the stairs into a magnificent hall. Placing Sita on a marble bench he called for some female servants and gave orders. "Take charge of this fair lady. Give her what food or silks or jewels or precious stones she wants. Not a harsh

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word should be said and not a hostile glance should be cast, as you care for your lives. And none should be allowed to see her without my permission."

Ravana now left the hall and sent for eight Rakshasa heroes of approved valour and courage and ordered them to go at once with their companies and the necessary weapons to Janasthana, his outpost on the mainland, where he had stationed his brothers, Khara and Dooshana, before. Their duty was to keep a close watch on the movements of Rama and Lakshmana in the forest of Dandaka and send him daily reports.

After sometime he returned to Sita to know how she was. He learnt from the attendants that she had contemptuously spurned all their offers of food and clothing and jewels. He found her in the same dazed condition as before. She shrank from the Rakshasas like a hunted deer from a pack of hounds. Ravana now wanted to impress her with his wealth and power by taking her round his palace and showing her all its beauties. So he dragged her by force all over the building from hall to hall and from apartment to apartment and showed its pillars of crystal and gold, its doors and windows made of ivory and silver, its jewelled floors and steps and its walls inlaid with countless gems and diamonds. He took her to his pleasure

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gardens laid out with beautiful walks and studded with thousands of rare trees and birds and adorned with the marble statuary of water-gods presiding over fountains.

" All these and a thousand more will be yours, O Sita," he said in a passionate appeal to her, " if you become the queen of Lanka. I will make you the chief queen taking precedence over all my wives. You have been unhappy till now, my lady. The hardships of the forest life have told on your health and beauty. Forget all that now, and enter upon this new life of joy, majesty and splendour. Be advised. Listen to me. Don't pine away in sorrow. Don't waste your precious life. Accept me. I love you, I long for you. Have pity on me. I am your slave. I prostrate myself before you and touch your feet. Never has Ravana bowed to a woman before."

Sita now became fearless in her anger. Disdaining to look at him, she turned round and, placing a piece of straw before her, addressed her reply to it. " The Prince of Ayodhya is my husband. He is my god. If you had attempted to do in his presence what you did today in his absence, you vile robber, you would have by now gone the way of your brothers—Khara and Dooshana. Even now don't think that you have

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escaped. Your days are numbered. You will be destroyed root and branch. This city to which you have brought me by force will pay heavily for your sin. These palaces and these gardens, these halls of gold and silver, all your barbarous wealth and possessions are mere dust in my eyes, and they will soon be reduced to dust and ashes. As sure as the sun will rise in the east to-morrow morning, the Prince of Ayodhya, my beloved husband, will come to Lanka and raze it to the ground. I am not afraid of you or your Rakshasa retainers here. You may do what you like. I have no desire to live. You may bind me. You may kill me. You may eat my flesh. You have power only over my body, not over my mind, which is with my husband. Even my body becomes insensitive at your touch. It is only a lump of clay. I defy you. I spurn you and your offers with my foot."

Ravana was startled to hear these words which sounded like a prophecy. But in a moment he rallied himself and said, "Look here. I will give you time—a full twelvemonth. Think over what I have said. If at the end of this period you are found to be of the same frame of mind, I shall command my servants to cut you to pieces and serve the meat for my breakfast. You said I might eat you. I will do it."

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He then angrily shouted for his servants and said, " Lead this captive at once to the Asoka garden and guard her there very carefully. Time is bound to cure her of her folly. But it must also be your duty to induce her to accept my love."

The servants bowed and led her away at once.

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CHAPTER XIV

MEANWHILE in the forests of Dandaka, Rama was returning to the hermitage after killing Maricha, who, on receiving a fatal wound from the hunter's arrow, had abandoned the form of the magic deer and assumed his own form. He was surprised to see Lakshmana coming in search of him. He asked him why he had left Sita alone and come to him. Lakshmana related the painful circumstances in which he was forced to leave the hermitage. He told him how the princess was frightened by Maricha's false cries and what harsh words she uttered to him when he refused to go, leaving her unprotected.

"You have done me wrong, my dear Lakshmana," remarked Rama on hearing this explanation. "My instructions to you were clear that you should not leave Sita under any circumstances. Taking seriously a frightened woman's meaningless words, you have come away leaving her alone in a forest infested with wild beasts and wicked Rakshasas. Heaven only knows what has happened to her. May God grant that we shall find her safe in the hermitage!"

So saying, the prince ran home in haste, while his brother followed cursing his stars for being found fault with both by Rama and by Sita that

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day. He found the stile in the fence pushed away and the door of the hut left open. He shouted for Sita, but there was no answer. He shaded his eyes and peered into every corner of the hut to see whether she was hiding herself in fun to frighten him, as was her wont. But not finding her he came out and cried, " Where did you leave her, O Lakshmana? I don't see her anywhere." The two brothers searched for her all over the place. They asked themselves whether she had gone into the forest near by to gather flowers again or to the Godavari or to the lotus pond to see the lotuses or whether she was hiding herself in some bush in her usual playful way to worry them. They ran from place to place, from tree to tree, from bush to bush all around the hermitage. They searched, they shouted, they hallooed. All was in vain. Rama became distraught and began to question every tree that grew in the neighbourhood, every beast and bird that he came across. His fears took shape and he saw in his imagination his beloved Sita mauled and carried away by wild beasts or devoured by Rakshasas. Soon he lost all hope of seeing her again and lamented his loss, calling on his beloved in a thousand endearing names. At last he sat down exhausted on a seat of stones and told Lakshmana that he would never leave that forest and that he

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would die where his Sita had died. Lakshmana might go back to Ayodhya and help Bharata instead of wasting his services on a doomed man in the forest. "How often, O Lakshmana," wailed Rama, "has Sita sat on this very seat by my side sparkling with laughter? She is gone, she who has been making all our hardships seem so light by her fun and frolic. But for her courage and cheerfulness we could not have endured this forest life of the past thirteen years. Whoever thought that this would be the end of it all? How can I go back to Ayodhya without her and face my mother? What answer shall I give to the question, 'Where is Sita?'—which will be put to me by everyone there. No, no. I will never go back. You will have to go alone and tell them the sad story of her end—and of my end too. Look at these spotted deer, Lakshmana, crowding round us. You know they are her pets. They are all in tears as well as we. If only these animals had the power of speech, what information—but why are they pointing to the sky and why are they all running south? Now they stop and are looking at us. Do, they want us to follow? Let us go and see."

Accordingly the brothers followed the spotted deer and. after going a couple of miles in the southern direction in their track, saw a chaplet

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of yellow flowers crushed and lying across their path. Rama at once recognised the flowers as those which he himself had put into Sita's hair that morning. Here was a clue. He eagerly picked up the chaplet, pressed it to his lips and ran after the deer still going south. In a minute they discovered some giant footprints on the ground. Immediately they bent down and carefully examined them and found at a short distance from the place the giant footprints intertwined with ordinary human footprints in a confused manner and beside them were big drops of clotted blood. So they concluded that two Rakshasas had probably quarrelled for her and fought, while Sita struggled to escape from them. Then they went a little farther and saw beside a bush a broken chariot with dead horses still in yoke and at a distance from them the corpse of the charioteer.

"There has been a big fight here," cried Rama. "Was it for Sita? Oh! What has happened to her? The victor has probably taken her away, leaving the vanquished and his broken chariot here. But where is the vanquished Rakshasa? This is only his charioteer. His dress shows it."

"Oh! there you see another giant lying dead,", cried Lakshmana pointing in the southern direction to a huge object lying on the ground.

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They ran there and discovered it was Jatayu in his last moments. They eagerly plied him with questions and asked him what the matter was and why he was lying in a pool of blood. The old vulture replied in feeble accents, " O Rama, he who robbed you of your beloved Sita has also robbed me of my life. It is that foul demon—Ravana, the son of Visravas." He then gave a brief account of his fight with Ravana and told them that the Rakshasa had carried Sita away, flying in the air in a southern direction. Rama and Lakshmana tried to get more information from him about Ravana's strength and his abode, but Jatayu's end was near. Before he could give replies to these questions, he vomited blood and breathed his last. The princes mourned long for him and gratefully cremated him and duly performed his obsequies, as if he were a human relative.

Then they continued their search and proceeded in the south-western direction as indicated by Jatayu. They passed Janasthana, and about seven miles south from there crossed the boundary and entered into the forest of Krauncha. They went through this impenetrable forest in short stages and travelled six miles east towards the hermitage of Matanga

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CHAPTER XV

WHILE they were wandering in this forest they suddenly heard a terrific noise behind their backs. They looked round to find out the cause and saw a huge monstrous object emerging out of the thick undergrowth of bushes. It waddled towards them with a hideous roar. The monster had no head nor legs, but only a huge trunk moving on two short stumps of thighs and covered all over with a fell of hair as long and as prickly as the quills of a porcupine. He had only one eye and that was in the middle of his breast and was provided with a moving lid, which, as he winked, disclosed an intermittent greenish flame behind. He had also a hideous mouth in his breast out of which projected two white curved fangs, and between them a lolling tongue dripping blood. He had two arms of monstrous length with which, as he waddled along his way, he gathered his prey and thrust it into his mouth. Very soon these arms encircled Rama and Lakshmana and dragged them slowly to that repulsive trunk along with the other animals in the forest. The princes were about to be lifted up and thrust into that deep crater of a mouth, when they regained their presence, of mind and cut off with their swords those tightening alligator arms and freed themselves. The giant

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now yelled with pain so as to make the forest trees tremble to their roots and fell down struggling in a pool of blood. Out of that weltering mass of flesh arose a cry, "Who are you, sirs, that have at last put an end to my miserable existence?" The question took the princes by surprise and Lakshmana briefly told him who they were and what their quest was and asked him whether he could give them any information. "I may, sirs," said the dying monster, "but not when I am still in this body which is the result of a curse brought on me by my sins. I have been waiting for you all these years. For I was told, when the curse was pronounced on me, that I should be released from it in years to come by Rama and Lakshmana, the Princes of Ayodhya. My name is Kabandha. I am the son of Danu. Once I had a radiant form, but the sins of pride and violence made me lose it and take on this loathsome body. After I breathe my last, reduce this carcass to ashes and make me regain my original form. Then I may be able to foresee things and tell you what you want to know."

The princes accordingly waited for a few minutes after he stopped speaking, and when they were sure he was dead, they dug a pit and placing the body in it burnt it to ashes. Kabandha now rose from the ashes clad in a radiant form which

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dazzled the eyes of the princes. Before going to heaven he addressed Rama and said, " Listen to me, O Prince, I will tell you the way in which you can regain the Princess who has been taken away from you. Go due west from here and make friends with Sugriva, the Vanara chief, who is now living with four of his friends on the Rishyamuka hill near Lake Pampa. He has been driven out of his kingdom by his elder brother Vali. Don't look down on him because he is a Vanara. Within his ape-like body there dwells a noble spirit possessing many good qualities that men might envy. Help him to regain his kingdom and he will help you to regain your wife. On your way to the Rishyamuka, you might also visit the hermitage of that holy woman Sabari, who is awaiting your arrival."

The next day the princes accordingly travelled due west towards Lake Pampa and reached the hermitage of Sabari which was situated at the western end of the lake. The hermitage originally belonged to a sage called Matanga, who with all his disciples, had performed *tapas* there and had gone to heaven only a few years before. Sabari had waited on the sage and his disciples and done them faithful service. So when they departed from the earth, they instructed her to wait for the arrival of

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the Prince of Ayodhya and entertain him at the hermitage and then follow them to heaven. Accordingly this holy woman had waited for two years living alone in the hermitage and storing nuts, fruits and honey for the entertainment of the prince.

When Rama and Lakshmana made their appearance she at once knew that they were the long-expected guests and fell at their feet and told them her story. She took them inside, washed their feet and spread out before them her stores of forest fare. " O Sabari, holy woman, have all your services to the sages and your austerities borne fruit? " asked Rama. " Have you conquered your flesh? Is your spirit ripe? Are you ready to go where the sages have gone? "

" Yes, sir," the holy woman replied, " my austerities and services have borne fruit today, as I have seen you. Today I am fit to go where my masters have gone. I have ever acted in accordance with their instructions. Give me leave to go."

" But will you not, O Sabari ", asked Rama, " show us round this holy hermitage, where so many sages lived and fulfilled the purpose of their life? "

" Yes, sir, most gladly," said the holy woman and took the princes round and showed them the

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sacred altars where the sages had given their offerings to the gods, the seats on which they had performed their *tapas* and the groves where they had gathered flowers for their worship.

" The forest beyond these groves," said Sabari, " is full of wild elephants, you hear their roars at night from the hermitage. But they dare not come near this place on account of the holiness of the sage Matanga and his disciples. Even when their cubs stray here they are swiftly called away by their mothers."

Having thus shown the princes round the hermitage and the groves surrounding it, Sabari took leave of them and desired to go to her masters in a higher world. Immediately before their very eyes she cast aside her old worn-out body on a sacred pyre which she had kept ready and passed away in a form of dazzling brightness.

The princes bowed and left the hermitage and continued their journey according to the instructions of Kabandha. They passed by Lake Pampa admiring its crystal waters over which shone thousands of lotuses and lilies in full bloom. It was spring. The air was cool and resonant with the notes of warbling birds. The trees had put forth new leaves and buds, and blossoms were coming out. It was pleasant to walk at this time through the

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forest surrounding the lake. But Rama's heart was heavy. The season constantly reminded him of his beloved Sita, who had a passion for the beauties of Nature. His one thought, as he walked under the shady trees breathing the scented air of spring, was how she would have enjoyed that wonderful scenery of the forest, lake and mountain. He now felt her absence most poignantly and poured forth his sorrow into the ears of Lakshmana. Tears trickled down the eyes of the two brothers as they thought of the torments Sita might be undergoing far away in an unknown land of monsters, while they were enjoying the cool breeze from over Pampa. Rama was inconsolable, as he thought of the happy days he had spent in her company at Chitrakuta and Panchavati before that cursed Rakshasi, Surpanakha, appeared on the scene. They were days of unclouded happiness, when he considered that his banishment was a blessing in disguise, for he and his young wife had all the time to themselves amidst natural surroundings of most ravishing beauty far away from the dust and noise of towns. He used to note in those days with thrilling pleasure Sita's love of flowers and birds, her remarkable courage and presence of mind, her cheerfulness and her ringing laughter, her natural beauty and her playfulness. The contrast between

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the past and present was unbearable, and it required all the patience and eloquence of Lakshmana to make his brother hope for better days, when they might rescue Sita from the hands of the enemy and go back to Ayodhya.

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CHAPTER XVI

WHILE the princes were thus going on their way to the mountain Rishyamuka to find out the abode of Sugriva, Sugriva himself along with his four friends saw them from the mountain heights, and mistaking them for the agents of his dreadful brother, Vali, fled away to more inaccessible heights and sent Hanuman, his trusted friend, to discover what their intentions were. Hanuman, who was destined to play a very important part in the subsequent history of the Prince of Ayodhya, now assumed the guise of a young ascetic and came to Rama and Lakshmana and asked them who they were and why they were wandering in the forest, announcing at the the same time that he was the messenger of Sugriva, the Vanara chief who had been driven out of his country by his brother Vali and that his master would be glad to meet them as a friend. Rama allowed the messenger to say all that he had to say and observed to his brother how faultless was his language, how fine his accent and how sweet his voice. "An ideal ambassador," said he, "who would be an ornament to the court of any king!" Lakshmana took the hint and told Hanuman that they were very glad indeed to meet the messenger of Sugriva, for Sugriva was the very person they were in search of for a friend and ally.

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Then he briefly narrated to him their history from the time of the intended coronation of Rama at Ayodhya to their adventure with Kabandha in the Krauncha forest and explained to him why they sought Sugriva's help. Hanuman was pleased with the narration and, thinking that it would be a very desirable alliance, said he would take them at once to his master. Disarming their fears he now put off his ascetic guise and assumed his own gigantic Vanara form and asked the princes to mount on his back. Then he flew up with the princes to the mountain fastnesses, where Sugriva was waiting for him. Introducing the princes to his master, he narrated their story and told him how they had come to seek his alliance.

"I am greatly honoured, O Prince," said Sugriva, "that you have come to seek the alliance of a sub-human creature like me. Here is my hand of friendship. Mine is the gain and mine the advantage derived from this alliance."

Rama clasped the hand of friendship that was so generously and so gracefully offered. Immediately the wise Hanuman kindled a fire to bear witness to the alliance made, and Rama and Sugriva solemnly went round it hand in hand saying, "Hereafter your sorrow is my sorrow and your joy is my joy."

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Sugriva now plucked down a big branch from a tree and both the friends sat on it and began to speak of each other's sorrows. When Rama heard how Vali, Sugriva's brother, had not only driven away Sugriva from Kishkindha but also robbed him of his wife and was living with her, his indignation was roused. "Is there no limit to the wickedness of rulers on earth?" he cried and vowed more than once that he would rid the country of such a wicked king. And when Sugriva heard how Ravana, the king of the Rakshasas, had carried off Sita from the forests of Dandaka while Rama and Lakshmana were away, he remembered how sometime ago, on the Rishyamuka, he and his friends saw a demon flying south with great speed and how a bundle of jewels tied up in a scarf was dropped in their midst.

"Could it be the Princess who dropped that bundle?" asked Sugriva. "We have preserved the jewels in a cave."

"Oh, bring them here," cried Rama, "let me see whether they are hers."

Sugriva ran and brought the bundle and placed the contents before Rama. The prince looked at them and immediately the whole place seemed to swim before his eyes, his head became dizzy and he sank to the ground. But in a moment he recovered

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and hugging those precious reminders of the princess to his heart, he cried to his brother, "O Lakshmana, come here and see these jewels which Sita cast down as she was being carried off by the monster. Surely you know and can recognise them all."

Lakshmana's reply on this occasion has justly become famous.

"I do not know these bracelets, nor these earrings of hers," said he, "but I know these anklets, for I saw them every day when I bowed at her feet."

Rama now turned once more to Sugriva and asked him where that monster who had carried off his beloved lived, what his strength was, and what his antecedents were, so that he might take steps at once to uproot him and his kingdom and rescue the lost princess. Sugriva replied that he knew nothing about his place or his strength, but promised to give every help to seek out the monster and compass his death. "Help me against my wicked brother, O Prince," said he, "a brother who has driven me away from my country, robbed me of my wife and tortured and imprisoned my friends and who is sending his emissaries every day to seize me and kill me. Restore me to Kishkindha and all its resources will be placed at your disposal for waging war against Ravana. That is the only way in which we can remove each other's sorrow."

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"But what is the cause of this deadly feud between you and your brother?" asked Rama.

"It is a long story, O Prince," said Sugriva, "but, if you have the patience to listen, I will narrate it now most truthfully, as God is my witness.

"When my father was alive, my brother Vali was held in great esteem by all of us for his extraordinary valour and strength. After the death of my father the ministers made my brother king, as he was the eldest of the family, and I was very obedient to him in all things. A feud once arose between him and a giant called Mayavi over a woman. The giant came one midnight to the city gate when all of us were asleep and roared, challenging my brother to come out and fight him. The women of the family and myself tried to dissuade Vali from going out at that hour. But he paid no heed to our words and went out in a fury to kill the giant. I did not, out of my love, want to see my brother go alone on this adventure. So I followed him. When the giant saw both of us coming out one after the other, he was afraid and ran away. We pursued him. As the moon was up by that time, we were able to see our way clearly and track the monster to his den in the forest. My brother boldly entered the den to fight the monster, asking me to guard the

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entrance till he returned. I wanted to go with him into the den to assist him in the fight, but he would not hear of it. He made me take an oath that I would wait at the entrance till he came back. So I waited and waited for days and months. A full year passed. I feared that my brother had been overpowered and killed. And my fears were confirmed, when at long last I saw a stream of blood issuing out of the cave and I heard confused yells of my brother and of some giants deep down in the cave. So to prevent the victorious monsters from issuing out of the cave I rolled a big boulder to the mouth of the cave and sealed the den as it were. I went back to Kishkindha, but said not a word about the whereabouts of my brother. But somehow the news leaked out and the ministers held a meeting and made me king. Sometime after my coronation, while I was ruling the kingdom according to law, my brother returned, having killed the giant in the den and kicked off the boulder from the mouth of the cave. He thought that I had treacherously sealed the den and seized the kingdom during his absence with the connivance of the ministers. He publicly denounced me, accused me of ingratitude and treachery and threw the ministers into prison. As the head of the kingdom I had then the power to resist him. But I did not, on account of my love

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and reverence for him. Instead I placed my crown at his feet and asked him to take it back and allow me to become his servant holding the royal umbrella. I told him that I had really thought him dead when I ran away from the cave and that I had no thought at all of kingship till it was forced on me by the ministers. I begged him, even if he did not believe my statement, to forgive me for what I had done and take me into his service. I fell at his feet and said, 'You are the king, my brother, not I. I accepted the crown only to prevent chaos in the kingdom during your absence. On my honour I say, I thought that you had been killed in the den by the giant.' But it was all in vain. He convened an assembly of his frightened subjects and, having narrated the story of his adventure, denounced me in their presence as an ungrateful and treacherous usurper and on the spot banished me from the country without allowing me even a change of clothing. After I left, he seized my wife and made her his own. Since then I have wandered all over the earth with four of my trusted friends who came away with me. I have sought shelter now on this mountain not far from my country, because, on account of a curse, Vali dare not come here. Thus have I endured, O Prince, untold miseries for no fault of mine. You now understand the cause of

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our feud, and until you free me from this fear and the shame of my life I can have no peace."

"I can judge your feelings, O Sugriva, from my own," said Rama. "I promise you once more that I will avenge your wrongs."

"I believe, O Prince, that you will do it," observed Sugriva. "But it is my duty to let you know the exact measure of my brother's strength. For Vali is not an ordinary being. His valour and strength are something superhuman. I will give you an instance. Once a giant called Dundubhi, whose shape was that of a bison and whose strength was that of many elephants, came roaring to the gates of Kishkindha and insultingly challenged Vali to come out and fight with him. Vali donned the golden neck-chain which was a gift to him from the gods, and went against the giant and, seizing him by the horns, whirled him round and round and dashed him on a rock. The giant was crushed to death. Vali then took the dead body in both his hands and flung it away several miles from his capital, so that some drops of the monster's blood were carried by the wind and scattered over the grounds of the holy hermitage of Matanga. The sage was angry at the sacrilege and pronounced a curse, saying that, if ever the author of that sacrilege should come within thirty miles of the

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hermitage, he would fall down dead. This is why Vali dare not come near this mountain where I am staying. It is within that prohibited area. I will show you, O Prince, the dead body of that giant which was flung away by Vali. It is there like a hillock dried up and shrivelled. And look at those gigantic sala trees, standing in a row. Vali once discharged here arrow upon arrow. And each arrow penetrated the trunk of a tree and came out on the other side. Such is the strength of my brother. I do not know how you can overpower him."

Rama made no reply. But Lakshmana, who was also listening to Sugriva's account, asked him with a smile, "What should my brother do now to convince you that he could successfully overpower Vali?"

"Excuse me, sir," replied Sugriva, turning to Rama, "I have said all this not to disbelieve or frighten you, but to give you an idea of the extraordinary strength of the adversary you have to deal with. Look at that giant's body there flung by my brother from the city's gate and at those sala trees through each of which his arrows could pass."

Rama now rose from his seat saying, "I think, O Sugriva, I must first create faith in you, whatever may be the way in which I may deal with

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your brother afterwards. Come. Let us go near these objects."

He led the way first to the dead body of the giant and raising it with the toe of his foot kicked it like a ball and it went out of sight. Then he went near the sala trees and bending his bow discharged an arrow, which went straight through the trunks of seven of them standing in a row and fell on the other side and buried itself deep in the ground.

"Are you satisfied now?" said Rama to Sugriva. Sugriva was filled with amazement. He bowed down and clasped the feet of the prince saying, "I am thrice blessed to have a friend in you. My difficulties are at an end. Vali's days are numbered."

"Let us go to Kishkindha then", said Rama.

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CHAPTER XVII

ACCORDINGLY they proceeded to the capital of Vali which was situated in a cup-like depression among the hills of the Rishyamuka range. It was at some distance from the hills. They passed on the way by the deserted hermitage of the seven sages, where, as in the ashrama of Matanga, the inmates had completed their *tapas* and gone to a higher world. In a few hours they reached the outskirts of the city. The arrangement was that Sugriva should make his appearance at the city gate and challenge Vali to fight by the acknowledged method of a 'lion's roar', while Rama, Lakshmana and the other friends of Sugriva should remain in ambush awaiting developments. So Sugriva went up and roared, and Vali came out to fight him. The two brothers closed at once on each other and fought hard and long with their fists and nails and teeth, striking, tearing and biting each other like two angry beasts. Their blood came out in spurts and made the ground slippery. But neither of them yielded. The prince watching this savage duel from his shelter could do nothing to help Sugriva, as the two fighting brothers resembled each other very closely like twins. He could not say which of them was Vali and which Sugriva. This was a contingency for which he was not prepared. So he

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looked on helplessly with his bow in hand, and the fight went on. At last the tide turned in favour of Vali. Sugriva, unable to bear the thundering blows of his brother, ran away from him yelling and bleeding, and sought refuge once more in the Rishyamuka where his assailant could not follow him. Vali therefore turned back to his capital in triumph.

After the fight was over, Rama and Lakshmana returned to the abode of Sugriva to see how he was and to explain to him the cause of their inactivity. Naturally they found him in a bitter mood. He would not even look at Rama. He turned aside and said, " But for your promise that you would kill him I would not have gone and challenged him. You should have spoken the truth and told me that you could not do it." He was, however, soon pacified when Rama told him why he could not let fly his arrow. The combatants resembled each other very closely and Rama could take no risk. If Sugriva was killed instead of Vali, it would be a terrible disaster for all. The prince therefore proposed that Sugriva should go and renew the fight the next day, but this time with something to mark him off from his brother. It was arranged that he should wear a garland of flowers round his neck and go and challenge Vali once more. Lakshmana accordingly

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cut a flowering creeper and fastened it round the neck of Sugriva.

So early the next morning, when it was still dark, the party consisting of Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva and his followers went up once again to Kishkindha. Sugriva approached the city gate and roared as before, while the rest remained in ambush. Vali was still in his bed. But as soon as he recognised the voice of his brother, he rose in great anger and vowed that he would not let him escape from his hands, but would mercilessly kill him this time. He girt his loins and was about to go out, when his wife, Tara, whom he held in great esteem, tried to restrain him.

"Give up this angry mood, my hero," she said, "and listen to reason. Your brother who was vanquished in the fight yesterday would not come and challenge you so early to-day, if he were not sure of some help from others. His exultant voice shows it. Moreover I have some information to give you. Angada tells me that he has heard from our spies that two celestial princes of the famous Ikshvaku family, the sons of Dasaratha of Ayodhya, have arrived at the Rishyamuka in search of Sita, who had been carried off by Ravana, as you know, and have promised to help Sugriva. You have heard of that great battle at Janasthana, where one

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of these Princes fought single-handed against fourteen thousand Rakshasas led by Khara and Dooshana and routed them all. Something tells me that you should not go out to-day to fight your brother. You should not by any means come into conflict with this Prince of Ayodhya. He is not what he seems. I have heard various stories of the superhuman power which he hides under his mortal frame. But I will not bother you with them now. I will only repeat what I have been telling you ever since you drove away Sugriva from the country. He is your own younger brother. He deserves your forgiveness and love, and not your hate. He has suffered sufficiently, wandering all over the earth. Do take him to your heart. He will add to your strength and be ever faithful to you. I beg of you to put an end to this unnatural quarrel You have listened to my advice in all things except in this. It is for your own good and the good of our beloved son, Angada, that I speak. Please don't go out now. Let him roar. He will soon be exhausted."

But the incessant roaring at the gate challenging him to come out and fight made it impossible for Vali to listen to the advice of Tara. His blood was up and he was foaming at the mouth as his wife went on pleading. It was only

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his great respect for Tara that prevented him from brushing her aside and jumping out to meet his adversary.

"Get in and don't stand in my way, O Tara," cried Vali. "I can't bear his insolence. I will teach him a lesson to-day which he will never forget. For your sake, I will spare his life. Don't you alarm yourself with imaginary fears. This is a feud between me and Sugriva, and nobody else would interfere, for that would be unfair."

So saying he took leave of her and went out. And Tara had to go in. As soon as Vali saw Sugriva outside the city gate, he rushed on him with clenched fists crying, "Look at this hand of mine. It will take your life to-day. You will not roar at my gate any longer."

"Come," replied Sugriva, "this hand will knock to pieces that swollen head of yours. You will not go home to-day."

With words like these they dashed against each other and fought hand to hand. Sometimes they rolled on the ground in deadly grips, sometimes they flew into the air and tore each other, and sometimes they separated only to break the branches of the trees growing near by and fight with them. And if one of them fell, the other was instantly on his back pounding him with his fists and knees. For a long

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time the result of the fight hung in the balance. Both were wounded, both ran blood and both were tired. And yet both roared and dealt blows at each other. Then they began to throw their reserves of power into the fight. Sugriva knew that his reserves were poor. So it was his last throw. Now or never. In his despair he looked in the direction of Rama, and at once there whizzed in the air a winged shaft that went straight to the heart of his adversary. Vali fell mortally wounded.

Rama and his companions now came up to the scene of the fight, and Vali, struggling with death, began to taunt the prince saying, "Is it your Kshatriya Dharma to kill one who is engaged in fighting another? What harm have I done you, O Prince, that you should thus join my brother and intervene in our quarrel and most unfairly kill me in the moment of my victory? If you had wanted help against Ravana, the King of the Rakshasas, and asked me, I would have brought your enemy bound hand and foot and delivered him to you. If you had asked me to find out where he had hidden your Sita, I would have searched the three worlds and brought her to you. Well, you have brought me now to death's door. I don't care if I die. Death comes to all. My life has come to its end. But you are going to live—live a long time. And how

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are you going to answer those who will denounce you for this disgraceful and treacherous act of yours? Yours will hereafter be a life of shame. Death is better than that kind of life."

"Why do you prate of Dharma, O Vanara—" calmly replied the prince, "you who have been leading a life of incest? Dharma requires that you should treat your younger brother as your son and his wife as your daughter. And what have you done instead, O vile sinner? You have not sinned against me. You have sinned against God and His Dharma. I am only His instrument and the instrument of those earthly rulers whose duty it is to maintain Dharma inviolate on earth. This is the punishment for your crimes and not a private combat between you and me. Do you think I would stoop to an alliance with one like you, however powerful you may be? I and mine would rather perish than accept help at your hands. You are angry, your mind is confused and so you are accusing me of having violated Dharma. On the other hand, it is to maintain the traditional Dharma and restore the sanctities of domestic life that I promised help to your wronged brother. I have interfered in your quarrel not as a combatant, but as a judge. So compose your mind O Vali, and accept this

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punishment, and then your sin will pursue you no longer."

Vali now saw the error of his ways and, bowing before the inevitable, commended his wife and son to the care of Rama. He then wanted to see Sugriva. When his brother came near him, he begged forgiveness for all the wrongs he had done him and asked him to rule the kingdom after him and give protection to Tara and Angada. He said to Sugriva:—

"Look upon young Angada as your own son, O brother. He has none but you for a patron. He is brave and valiant and will be at your right hand in all your efforts. As for Tara, the daughter of Sushena, you know how intelligent and far-seeing she is. Whatever she says is sure to come to pass. Take her advice in all things, you will never regret it. One word more. Take as my last gift to you this golden chain from my neck. It was bestowed on me by the high gods in heaven. Wear the necklace for my sake, O brother."

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CHAPTER XVIII

MEANWHILE Tara and all the members of the royal family, having heard of the result of the battle, came to the dying chief and fell on the ground by him and wailed piteously. Vali feebly called for his son Angada and asked him to follow Sugriva faithfully and breathed his last. It was a very trying scene for Sugriva. He could not bear to see the women weeping and wailing round the corpse of his brother. So he came up to Rama with tears in his eyes and said, "You have carried out your promise, O Prince, and have killed my brother and given me the kingdom of Kishkindha. But I have no desire now for the pleasures of life. I am the cause of all this woe. My heart bleeds to see Tara and Angada wailing round the corpse of my brother. I have no desire to live, having caused such sorrow to the family. What have I to do with kingdom or kingship hereafter? Let Angada succeed his father. I will retire to the Rishyamuka and continue my life as an exile. I have sinned, O Prince, in compassing the death of my brother and I must do penance for it all my life. My friends here will go to Kishkindha and make Angada king and will carry out all your orders in the search for the Princess. Allow me to get away from here. I can't bear this any longer. Kishkindha will see me no more."

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The prince bore him patiently. He was also moved to tears. He said nothing to Sugriva. His eyes were turned to Tara, who was weeping over the corpse of her husband, paying no heed to those who were begging her to desist and console her boy Angada who was sitting by dazed and motionless. He quickly bent his steps to the spot to give what consolation he could to the royal lady.

Tara was inconsolable. She wept long, rolling on the ground by the side of the corpse. And when she knew that the prince came near to console her, she said, "O Prince, I beg of you a favour. From that bow which you are holding in your hand discharge an arrow against me as you have done against my husband. I cannot live here without him, and I am sure he cannot live without me, wherever he goes. O sir, judge of his present state from your own feelings. You are bereft of your wife and you know what that means. So despatch me at once to my husband. You will then be conferring on us the greatest boon we can think of. It is not wrong to kill me. Husband and wife are one. When you have killed the one you have killed the other. So complete what you have begun, I beg of you. Else you will be guilty of having parted husband from wife."

"You are the wife of a warrior, O Tara", replied Rama, "and you should bear your sorrows

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better. You have done no wrong and it is not proper that you should court death at my hands. You know that, if your husband had listened to your advice, he would not have brought you all to this pass. You were never blind to his faults. All the greater glory to you as you love him so faithfully in spite of what he has done. He has atoned for his sin to-day and will reap in a better world the fruits of whatever was good and noble in him. So do not grieve for him, O Tara. But turn to the duty that you owe to your young son, Angada, and follow the parting advice of your husband."

She was pacified a little and Rama withdrew from the scene. The prince now went to Sugriva and advised him to make arrangements for the cremation of his brother. And Lakshmana seconded his efforts by going to the followers of Sugriva and urging them to bestir themselves for the performance of the funeral rites. The mourners then sent servants to the town and got the royal palanquin, the bearers and the priests. The citizens of Kishkindha also came in large numbers. The funeral procession was formed. The hearse was carried in state by Sugriva and others and taken to the side of a mountain brook where a pyre of fragrant wood had already been made. When the cremation was over, the mourners bathed in the river and performed the

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necessary rites according to the directions of the priests. Then Sugriva and his followers returned to Rama and Lakshmana to consult them on the next step to be taken. On behalf of the people of Kishkindha, Hanuman now addressed Rama and requested him to go into the city and formally install Sugriva on the throne in succession to Vali. But the prince declined, saying that he was under a vow not to enter any town or village but to live in a forest for fourteen years. He asked Hanuman and other chiefs to take Sugriva to the capital and install him with all pomp and ceremony. He then turned to Sugriva and advised him to install at the same time Angada, the son of Vali, as the crown prince, so that the family feud might be permanently healed and all parties satisfied.

"The rainy season has set in," concluded the prince. "This is the month of Sravana. We can do nothing in the next two months. It is only when the month of Kartika comes that we can think of our preparations for finding out the abode of Ravana. Meanwhile, O Sugriva, you might go and, live in your beautiful capital and gain the love and confidence of your subjects, while my brother and I will retire to the mountains and live there during the rains. But remember that, as soon as autumn sets in, you should fulfil your promise to me."

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CHAPTER XIX

THUS the friends parted. Rama and Lakshmana retired to the mountain range and found a cave where they could stay and spend the rainy season. This cave was very near Kishkindha as the crow flies. The princes could hear from there the hum and roar of Sugriva's capital. It was deep and well-sheltered from wind and rain, and at the mouth of it there was a fine cluster of sandal trees, under which on cloudless days they could spend the daytime. And a little beyond the trees there was a beautiful tarn into which the rain water that fell on the neighbouring slopes found its way and where lilies, blue, white and red, grew in great profusion during the season. Whenever the weather permitted, Rama and Lakshmana used to sit on the grassy margin of this small lake and admire the pure colours of the flowers that grew in it. All around them were mountain ranges rising tier above tier to the sky, so that Rama used to say that one could take the flowers of the valley and ascend step by step to the clouds and offer them at the feet of the sun-god. But in his moods of depression the prince would compare the bits of white clouds overhead touched by the rays of the setting sun to wads of cotton bandage over bleeding wounds. This was the most unhappy period of Rama's life, when, with

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a bleeding heart, he had to sit idle unable to do anything. Day in and day out he had to watch from his mountain cave the black clouds in the sky with their blinding flashes of lightning and the pelting rain. Sita was never away from his thoughts. He would often compare the dark cloud, with the lightning moving across the sky to Ravana carrying off the princess and would think of the agonies she would be suffering in her prison-house. Then his heart would be torn with anger and sorrow and he would tell Lakshmana what he would do after the rains were over. But the rains went on day after day flooding the mountain area all around them so that the tarn could no longer be distinguished. It was all one sheet of water. The princes could not stir out of their cave for several weeks. It was with the greatest difficulty that they could maintain themselves during those days. But for the care and forethought of Lakshmana, who had kept a small store of nuts and dried fruits, they would have starved and died of hunger and cold. The two brothers could not but think sometimes of the constrast between their miserable state and the state of Sugriva, warm in his palace and surrounded by those near and dear to him.

"I hope he won't forget us," said Rama, "let him make himself happy after his long period of

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wanderings and privations. Ours is a big undertaking and it will not be over in a day. That is why I asked him to think of helping us only after the rains."

"Yes. We must be patient till the rains are over," said Lakshmana. "I am sure that Sugriva will be as good as his word and help us. We have to wait till all this water subsides and the roads become dry and passable."

Meanwhile Sugriva was making himself very happy indeed in his palace at Kishkindha. He had not only been installed on the throne and been reunited with Ruma his wife, but had also married, according to the law of the land, the intelligent and beautiful Tara, the widow of Vali. He steeped himself in the pleasures of the palace. He ate and drank to his heart's content and was rarely found sober during the day. He entrusted the affairs of the kingdom to his ministers and never bothered himself about the welfare of his subjects. He had no enemies to fear now and no parties to conciliate, as he had satisfied all parties by making Tara his queen and Angada the crown prince. He had able and faithful ministers who ruled wisely and well in his name. So he gave himself up entirely to his pleasures and never bestowed a thought on his friends shivering in the mountain cave. The rainy

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season had come and gone. But Sugriva knew nothing about it. Months passed like days for him. He never left the queens' apartments. He was not aware that the month of Kartika had come, that the skies had cleared and that rivers had become fordable again. He was inaccessible to his friends and counsellors, and none dared to remind him of his duties. Autumn was advancing and yet Sugriva did not stir. This was too much for Hanuman, his trusty counsellor. He knew that Sugriva was running the risk of displeasing the Prince of Ayodhya. So he made bold to force his way into the palace and gently reminded Sugriva of his promise to Rama and Lakshmana.

"Let us not wait, O King of the Vanaras," said he, "till we get a reminder from the Prince. He has fulfilled his part of the contract, you have yet to fulfil yours. It is already late. The rainy season is gone. Autumn has come. Let us not expose ourselves to the charge of having neglected our friends."

"Ah, yes, I forget," replied Sugriva yawning, "you might, O Hanuman, go and tell Nila to send out an order summoning all our forces to the capital within fifteen days, on pain of death."

Hanuman went out with the royal command and Sugriva returned to his pleasures in the palace.

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Days passed again for the latter as before. He forgot all about the order he had sent to his commander-in-chief. He ate and drank and made himself merry in the company of his queens. But one day he was rudely shaken out of his torpor by the news which Angada brought that Lakshmana was standing at the gate like an angry cobra trodden unawares by a man and was demanding an urgent interview with the " King of the Vanaras." When Sugriva heard of this, he was startled, his face became pale and his mouth dry. He dared not go and face the angry prince himself. So he begged Tara, who was beside him, to go and pacify Lakshmana and offer some excuse for his delay. Tara went out, met Lakshmana and asked him why he was so angry and who in Kishkindha had dared to provoke him. When Lakshmana saw the queen of the Vanaras instead of the king, whom he had expected, he restrained himself somewhat and, bending his head low, replied, " What, don't you know that Sugriva is neglecting his duties and has not fulfilled the promise he made to us? The rains have stopped, autumn is far advanced and yet he has not bestirred himself. My brother is very much displeased with his conduct."

"You are not fair to your friend, O Lakshmana," rejoined Tara. " Sugriva has already taken action.

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He has not been entirely idle as you think. He has already commanded that all the Vanara forces should assemble in the capital within fifteen days. And they are all coming. The time limit of fifteen days is not yet passed. You should not judge us, poor Vanaras, O Lakshmana," concluded the sagacious Tara, " by your own standards of self-control. We are all creatures of the senses. Our appetites are strong and our minds are weak. And you especially, O Lakshmana, are very austere and abstemious. You are still a stranger to the attractions of women. Love has not yet entered your heart and you don't know what havoc it can make of one's ideas of faithfulness, decorum and good manners. Come in, O Lakshmana. You are a friend and there can be no objection to your entering the private apartments of Sugriva."

Lakshmana was thus completely disarmed and taken by the resourceful Tara into the presence of Sugriva. All the women surrounding Sugriva rose in their places in deference to the prince, and Sugriva himself respectfully saluted him and advanced to take him by the hand and conducted him to a seat. The prince then repeated the message of his brother. It was, of course, rather severely worded. Sugriva was accused of breach of faith and ingratitude and was told that, if he

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did not carry out his promise, he would go the way of Vali. The assembly was startled to hear Rama's message, but Tara once more came to the rescue of Sugriva and said, "The King of the Vanaras, O Lakshmana, is neither faithless nor ungrateful. For Rama's sake he is prepared even to sacrifice us all. It is no easy matter to prepare an expedition against so powerful an enemy as Ravana, the King of the Rakshasas. We have to muster all our forces, we *are* mustering them. Orders have already been sent to every nook and corner of Kishkindha that within fifteen days all regiments should reach the capital. So leave off your anger, O Prince, and kindly set at ease these frightened ladies."

Thus did the tactful Tara save the situation. Lakshmana was satisfied and began once more to talk familiarly to Sugriva. And the latter humbly apologised to the prince for the delay caused in assembling his forces. He once more assured Lakshmana of his loyalty and faithfulness to Rama and said that he had no hesitation in placing himself, his subjects and all the resources of his kingdom at the disposal of the Prince of Ayodhya. It was now the turn of Lakshmana to express regret for the harsh words he had uttered under the impression that Sugriva had totally

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neglected the princes living in the cave of the Rishyamuka.

" Come then with me, O Sugriva," concluded Lakshmana. " Come and see my brother and judge for yourself his state of mind. You will understand why he has sent me with this message."

" Certainly I will," replied Sugriva. " I will always follow your instructions."

He then ordered his state palanquin made of gold to be brought and asked Lakshmana to get in. The two friends thus reconciled to each other were then borne over the steep mountain slopes to the cave where Rama dwelt. They were followed by a large retinue of liveried servants who came up and stood at attention all round the cave. Sugriva got down from the palanquin, and going up to Rama in the cave respectfully prostrated himself before him as before his great benefactor and patron. Rama was pleased to find Sugriva so deferential, though he was now the head of a powerful State. He was thoroughly satisfied when he learnt that all the Vanara forces in Kishkindha were being assembled for an expedition against Ravana. He remarked, " If the sun shines during the day and scatters the darkness of the earth, if the moon rises during the night and makes the mountain tracks clear, there is nothing surprising to us, for it is their nature to do so.

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Similarly, when the noble Sugriva exerts himself for a friend in need we are not at all surprised. He only reveals his true nature."

While the two friends were thus exchanging compliments, clouds of dust arose in the air and covered the whole region of mountain and forest. For Sugriva had ordered before starting from his palace that all the armies so far assembled should immediately, along with their leaders, report themselves to him on the Rishyamuka mountain. So they were coming now, one by one. First came Satabali with his vast army of ten thousand regiments of different hues—some reddish like the morning sun, some pale grey like the fading moon and some light yellow like the filaments of a lotus. Then came Sushena with another ten thousand. He was the father of Tara and shone like a hill of gold. He was followed by the father of Ruma, the queen, with his host of a thousand. Next came Kesari, the father of Hanuman, with a large army of over twenty thousand. And these were followed in quick succession by the forces led by such well-known heroes as Dhumra, Nila, Panasa, Gavaya, Darimukha, and the twins, Mainda and Dvivida. Then came the hosts led by Gaja, Gandhamadana, Rambha, Durmukha and others too numerous to mention. And, lastly, came the armies commanded

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by those three illustrious heroes, the old Jambavan, who, though of a different clan, owed allegiance to the king of Kishkindha, the young crown prince, Angada, who was the official head of the home regiments and Hanûman of immortal fame, who had under him a host of veterans, on whom the people looked with awe and wonder as on the white dazzling peaks of Kailasa. These Vanara forces of Sugriva could not only march on land and leap from tree to tree, but also swim in water and fly in air. But, most extraordinary of all, they could assume any shape they liked. In this they resembled the Rakshasas. But, while the Rakshasas were mostly cannibals, the Vanaras were vegetarians and ate only raw uncooked food. Also, while the Rakshasas used weapons of war, made of iron and steel, wielded bows and arrows and rode in chariots drawn by horses, the Vanaras could fight only with their teeth and nails or with branches of trees and the stones on the hill-side.

When the Vanara armies came and occupied the entire region round the cave of the princes, as far as the eye could see, many millions in number like a cloud of locusts, Sugriva surveyed them and said to Rama, " All our armies have not yet come. Many are still on the way. They will be here in a few days. Our entire army, O Prince, is at your

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command. You might give now any orders you like, and they shall be obeyed."

"It is for you, O King of the Vanaras, to give the orders," said Rama, " and not for me or my brother. You know our needs, and you must devise ways and means. First, let us know whether my beloved Princess is still alive and where Ravana has hidden her. When once we know this, we can afterwards think of the means of reaching the place with our army."

" Very well," said Sugriva and called for one of his army chiefs, Vinata by name, and asked him to take one of his regiments and go east and search for Sita in all the countries lying in that direction. He then requested Sushena, the father of Tara, to go west with a large army and search for the princess similarly. Next he turned to Satabali and asked him to go north as far as the Himalayas and see whether Ravana kept the princess in any of the forests and mountains lying in that direction. And, finally, he asked the crown prince Angada himself to lead the expedition to the south with a large contingent of veterans including Hanuman, Jambavan and others.

Sugriva gave detailed descriptions of the countries where his expeditionary forces had to search for Sita, for he had known all these lands during the days of his exile from Kishkindha. He

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also gave strict instructions to the leaders that they should finish their search and come back within a month. Those who overstepped the limit of one month without proper reasons would lose their lives.

The leaders who had been asked to go north, east and west bowed and departed at once with their respective companies. When the expedition to the south to be led by Angada was about to leave, Sugriva specially called Hanuman to his side and said, " There is none equal to you, O Hanuman, in strength, valour, swiftness, discrimination or wisdom. I have great hopes that you will succeed where others have failed. You should try your best and bring us news of the Princess."

When the prince saw what great confidence Sugriva had in Hanuman, of whose powers he himself had formed a very high opinion, he gave him his signet ring and said, " By this token O valiant hero, will the Princess recognise without fear or suspicion that you have come from me. Like your own master, I have great hopes that you will succeed and bring us good news." Hanuman bent low, touched the feet of the prince and taking the ring from his hand placed it reverently on his own head before securing it about his person. He then took leave of Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva and departed in the company of Angada.

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After the expeditionary forces had departed and the rest of the army had been ordered to go home, the prince turned to Sugriva and expressed his wonder at the marvellously detailed knowledge the latter had shown about the various countries of the world. The king of the Vanaras then related to him how he had personally visited all the places he had described, for he had been afraid during the days of his exile that the long arm of his brother Vali would reach him wherever he hid himself. And his fears were justified, because Vali's emissaries were always on his track wherever he went. Then it was the wisdom of Hanuman that saved the situation. He advised his chief not to run from place to place, but to take refuge on the Rishyamuka mountain near Kishkindha within the area prohibited for his brother by the curse of the sage Matanga. "Hanuman is ever my right hand," concluded Sugriva. "It was he who brought me to this place of safety. It was he who accompanied me in all my wanderings and defended me against my enemies. It was he who brought you and me together. It was he who arranged our alliance. And I feel sure it will be he who will bring us good news of the safety of the Princess."

Thus terminated this great meeting on the mountain, after which Sugriva returned to his capital and the princes retired to their cave.

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CHAPTER XX

WITHIN the allotted time of thirty days all the expeditions that had been sent out by Sugriva returned home, except that which went south. They reported to the king of the Vanaras that they had searched all possible hiding places in the various lands they had visited, but could find no trace of the princess. The expedition led by Angada went south and searched all forests, mountains and buildings and had various adventures, but could get no news of Sita. The time limit of one month was fast approaching; and seeing that they were no nearer their goal than at the beginning, they wanted to return home. They were all tired, foot-sore and thirsty in a thick impenetrable forest, when they came across what looked like the mouth of a cave from which were issuing birds of various kinds on wings dripping with water. Hoping to find some water to drink within the depths of the cave, they descended into it. The passage was totally dark. They could only grope their way on a long downward slope. Down, down they went. There seemed to be no end. They must have walked some miles. It was a most trying experience. They held one another's hands and, like men totally blind, cautiously advanced step by step, pausing at intervals, breathing hard through

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terror and uncertainty and encouraging one another. Some suggested going back. But to go back was as difficult as to go forward. They might all die of thirst and never reach the mouth of the cave again. So they decided to proceed. It was a hopeless task. They cursed the moment when they had decided to enter the cave. They were dying of thirst and hunger and could scarcely support themselves on their legs. But the most terrible thing was the darkness all around them. It was stifling. It was as if they had plunged into a deep well of pitch. They gave up all hopes of life and mechanically dragged themselves forward, as they could do nothing else. Some suggested that they might as well sit and die instead of enduring this agony of going farther into the darkness. All the same they moved on. At last they felt it was growing a little less dark. Was it only their imagination? No, in a few minutes they were able to see one another's haggard faces. It was some relief. But their terror and uncertainty still remained, for they did not know where they were going in the bowels of the earth, and there was always the paralysing thought of how to return from this bottomless pit. Meanwhile it became less and less dark and they emerged into a wide plain full of trees of burnished gold. Their leaves were beaten gold, their

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flowers were embroidered gold and their fruit solid gold. It was gold, gold everywhere. The trees were gold, the grass was gold, the lotuses that grew in the ponds were gold and even the fishes and frogs that swam in the water were gold. Gazing with wonder, the party marched on and saw in the centre of this garden of gold a magnificent palace whose doors and windows, beams and rafters and walls and pillars were made of purest gold. They entered the building and found it fully furnished with seats high and low, with couches, mirrors and vessels of various shapes and with carpets of wonderful colours. The walls were set with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and other precious stones arranged in beautiful designs so that every room had its own pattern of light of mixed hues. Open-eyed with wonder the party moved cautiously from room to room of this palace which was so lavishly furnished, but which seemed to be uninhabited. The air was loaded with a heavy scent of flowers arranged in curious ways in vases of alabaster set on jewelled stands. The fresh flowers in every room showed that the palace was occupied, but no inmate was visible. The Vanaras led by Angada and Hanuman traversed the whole building in dumb astonishment and came out on the other side, when suddenly they saw

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a radiant being clad in deerskins and bark garments emerge out of a small chapel in the compound. She was an aged woman of marvellous beauty. Her face and attire showed that she had been spending her days in fasting, prayer and penance. Immediately on seeing her the Vanaras instinctively folded their hands in reverent salutation, and Hanuman made bold to ask her who she was and whether the palace belonged to her And he informed her that, wandering in the forest in search of water to quench their thirst, they saw some birds issuing out of a cave on wet wings and thinking that there might be water somewhere in its recesses, they got into a dark passage of great length and reached that garden of gold and that wonderful palace. Then the aged woman replied in grave accents, "This palace originally belonged to a demon called Maya. He had performed *tapas* for many years in a forest and got a boon that all those castles in the air which men dream of should go to him in reality with all their wealth of gold, silver and precious stones. And with the wealth thus acquired he built this palace for his own pleasure. But he did not long enjoy it. For in his pride of power he dared to make approaches to a celestial damsel called Hema in Indra's court, and Indra in anger struck him down with his thunderbolt and bestowed

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this palace on Hema as a prize. That *apsarasa*, far-famed for her song and dance, comes here now and then with her companions to practise her art. She is my friend. She has asked me to take care of this place during her absence in heaven. My name is Svayamprabha. I live here and keep my fasts and vigils and try to conquer the cravings of my flesh. This is my story. And I should like to know yours, O Vanaras. But you might narrate it to me at leisure after you have refreshed yourselves with the food and drink I will now try to give you."

So saying, the holy woman conducted them to an outhouse and set before them platters of gold containing juicy fruits and nuts of various kinds and jugs of water, mixed with honey. And after they had eaten and drunk to their heart's content Hanuman related to her the story of the Prince of Ayodhya, for whose sake they had been sent on a mission to the southern countries.

"We had almost perished on our way to this palace, O holy woman," concluded Hanuman, "you have saved our lives. Kindly tell us in what way we can repay the debt we owe you and show our gratitude." "No debt is due to me, O Vanaras," replied Svayamprabha, "I have done only what Dharma demands. You are my guests and I owe a duty to you."

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"We have sought shelter under your roof, O Svayamprabha," Hanuman rejoined, "and have taken advantage of your hospitality. We now ask one more favour of you. Wandering in the mazes of this cave which has led us here, we have already exceeded the limit of thirty days imposed on us for our return by our master Sugriva. Please tell us how we can now go back swiftly to the surface of the earth."

"I am sorry, O Hanuman, for you and your band of Vanaras," she replied, "those mortals who come here cannot go back. That is the penalty they have to pay for entering this forbidden land."

Their hearts sank within them when they heard these words. They thought of the inglorious end of their mission and of their wives and children at home and burst into tears. Svayamprabha was now moved to pity and said, "Don't be downcast. I will try to help you, O Vanaras, as you are the emissaries of the Prince who is an embodiment of Dharma. I will put to test now the spiritual merit I have acquired here. If you are fortunate, I may succeed. But you should obey my instructions strictly. Close your eyes, all of you, and don't open them till I tell you." They obeyed her and closed their eyes. After a few moments, she said again, "Now you may open your eyes." They opened their

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eyes and found themselves on the southern mountain range, and in front of them, as far as their eyes could see, was the wide blue expanse of the sea. Before they recovered from their surprise, Svayamprabha, who was standing beside them, said, " May good fortune attend you, O Vanaras! Farewell! " and vanished from their sight.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE Vanaras were at first very glad that they had miraculously escaped from the underground palace of gold, but they soon realised that the limit of one month imposed on them by Sugriva had already been passed. They did not know what to do. If they should return now with no news of Sita they would all be condemned to death. Angada, the leader of the band, was particularly unhappy. He thought that Sugriva would take this opportunity to get rid of him. Being the son of Vali he was a rival to the throne. His being made the crown prince was due to the pressure of Rama and others and not to any love on his uncle's part. Therefore Angada said it would be better for him to die on this mountain range than to return to Kishkindha and be condemned to death. Hanuman tried his best to cheer him up. But Angada would not listen to him. He made up his mind to starve himself to death and laid himself down on the grass. He gave a farewell message to his mother Tara and asked his companions to convey it to her and tell her the manner of her son's death. His companions sat round him in tears, assuring him that none of them would go back to Kishkindha without their leader and that all would die with him there on the mountain.

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While they were thus conversing, a huge vulture with broken wings crept out of the mountain cave not far from them and rejoiced at the sight of so many creatures, who, if they were killed at one stroke, would form good food for him for several months. The Vanaras guessed the intentions of this carrion bird from his looks, but they did not care to stir from their place. They thought it would be a more merciful death to be killed at one stroke than to starve themselves over a number of weeks.

"We should welcome this ravenous creature," cried Angada, "he is death incarnate for us. We die in the cause of the Prince of Ayodhya. Only, our death is not so glorious as that of Jatayu, who, we were told, died fighting the Prince's enemy, who was carrying off Sita from the forest."

When the vulture heard these words of Angada, he addressed the Vanaras in their own language and said, "Who are you, sirs, that refer to the death of my beloved brother Jatayu, whom I have not seen for many a long year? I am Sampati, Jatayu's elder brother. I am wingless, as you see. I can only creep. Will you kindly convey me swiftly to the place where you are assembled, so that I may hear at once more of my brother?"

The Vanaras were not disposed to trust him. But Angada took the risk, as he was desperate, and

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brought the wingless vulture down from his cave to where they had assembled. He then related to him the story of the Prince of Ayodhya including the abduction of the princess, the death of Jatayu and their own mission to the south.

'Oh, how powerless am I,' cried Sampati, "to take vengeance on Ravana who has killed my brother! I am old and weak and have lost my wings."

"What happened to your wings, O Sampati?" asked Angada, "and why have you been living so far apart from Jatayu, your brother?"

"It is a long story, O Prince of the Vanaras," said Sampati. "But I will relate it briefly. And though I cannot now avenge the death of my brother by killing Ravana, I can give you information about him which may lead to his destruction.

"Listen to me carefully, O Vanaras. In our younger days my brother Jatayu and I laid a wager as to which of us could fly higher in the sky. We both started at the same time and soared higher and higher till the forest below appeared like a small plot of grass, the mountains like the stones on the way side and the rivers like slender threads. We flew higher still. It was midday and the sun was right over our heads. But we did not mind it. We

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spread out our wings and put forth all our strength and went up higher. It was an equal match. Neither of us would give up the race and acknowledge defeat. It was getting unbearably hot and yet in our youthful pride we flew higher still. It was most foolish of us to have persisted. But the spirit of contention had made us reckless. We threw all ideas of safety to the winds and went up higher still. I was perspiring and breathing hard and a feeling of faintness was coming over me and my sight was beginning to fail, when, glancing at my brother to see how he was, I saw to my consternation that he was dropping down like a plummet quite unconscious of what was happening to him. I immediately checked my flight and went to his rescue, covering him with my wings. We both now began to fall. My wings were burnt. But my brother got down with his wings intact. He recovered from his swoon and fell somewhere. I do not know where, for I have never seen him since. I fell on this mountain range and have since been eking out my miserable existence here.

"This happened, O Vanaras, many, many years ago. In those days there was living on this mountain a holy sage called Nishakara. After my fall, I slowly crept to his hermitage to see him and get his blessing in my distress. When I reached his place,

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I saw him coming back from his ablutions in the river, accompanied by all the creatures of this place, lions, tigers, bears, elephants and serpents of various kinds, like a faithful band of followers. I was resting under the shade of a tree in front of his hermitage, hoping to be recognised by him, for I had known him before and had met him several times. But, as I had lost my wings, he could not recognise me. He went in, bidding farewell to the creatures that followed him, and they all bowed and went their way. In a few minutes the sage came out and approaching me asked whether I was not Sampati, the vulture. I bowed assent and he questioned me as to what had happened to me and my wings. I then gave him an account of our flying match and begged him to help me to recover my wings. The sage thought a while and said, 'You will get back your wings and feathers, O Sampati. But you have to wait patiently for a long time. As I look into the future, I see that, ages hence, there will come into this southern country a famous Prince of Ayodhya in search of his Princess carried away by Ravana, the King of the Rakshasas. You will have to live here and give what information you can about the abduction of the Princess to his emissaries. It is only then that you will recover your wings. I too should like to stay till the

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Prince comes, but this human frame cannot endure so long. But, being a vulture, you can live till he comes.'

"So said the holy sage and withdrew into his Ashrama. And I have been waiting all these years for you. It is only the other day, as it were, that my son Suparsva, who supports me by getting food at the proper time, came late and told me, as an excuse for his delay, that he had been hovering over the sea to catch fish for my dinner, when he was asked by a Rakshasa, who was flying away with a beautiful woman struggling under his arm and crying 'O Rama, O Lakshmana,' to move out of his way. My son made way for him and was afterwards told by some frightened creatures of the air that the Rakshasa was no other than the King of Lanka—an island about a hundred yojanas from here in the southern sea. I then thought that it must be the Princess of Ayodhya that was being carried away and hoped that the day of my deliverance was approaching. But I never expected you, Vanaras, the emissaries of the Prince, so soon here.

"I will now gladly give you what information I can about Ravana and his island abode. Ravana the King of the Rakshasas, is the son of Visravas and the step-brother of Kubera, one of the guardian

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deities of the earth. His capital is Lanka. It is on an island about one hundred yojanas from here. It is a most beautiful city built originally for Kubera by Visvakarma, the architect of the gods. Its walls and gates are made of gold. Its splendour dazzles the eyes, as does the midday sun. I have eyes, O Vanaras, which can see things far away. I belong to a race of birds who trace their descent to Vinata, the mother of Garuda, who bears the great God Vishnu on his wings. So, to our eyes are revealed things which are hidden from mortal gaze. From here I see the sad Princess of Ayodhya, clad in yellow silk, sitting in Lanka surrounded by a number of cruel Rakshasa women, her guards. There is no mistaking. I assure you she is there in the precincts of Ravana's palace. So I advise you to cross over to Lanka and meet her and bring back news of her to the Prince, her husband. There is something in me which tells me, O Vanaras, that one of you will be able to do this and that all will be well in the end. Well, my task is over. And look at me now. What a miracle is this! See how at my sides my wings are growing. O holy sage Nishakara! How true are your words! I am my true self again. I am the old Sampati now who dared to fly in the face of the sun. I will fly away now. Take heart,

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O Vanaras, from what you have heard and seen. Let these wings of mine be a sign to you of your coming triumphs. Farewell."

The Vanaras stood up and waved their hands in farewell to Sampati, as he flew away. Their joy knew no bounds, because they had now a clue to the abode of Ravana and an assurance that the princess was there. Their mission was not going to be a failure. They had no longer any fear that Sugriva would punish them for having overstepped the limit of time imposed on them. The problem facing them now was different. Who among them could leap over this long distance of the sea that separated Lanka from the mainland? Who among them had the courage to go single-handed into the enemy's land and see the princess who was so closely watched and return unscathed? Angada posed these questions to his followers and began to ask them individually how far each of them could fly. One said his limit was twenty yojanas, another thirty yojanas, a third forty, a fourth fifty and so on. Angada himself said that he could go all the length of one hundred yojanas, but he doubted whether he could have the strength to come back. Thereupon the old Jambavan said that Angada was modest, for he had the strength to go and come back—not once or twice—but several

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times. But he ought not to go. He was the leader of the band, and he should take no risks. One might lop off a branch or two of a tree and yet the tree can stand. But if one cuts off the tap-root, the tree with all its branches falls to the ground. "You are like the tap-root, O Prince of the Vanaras, and we are like the branches." He then turned to Hanuman, who was sitting a little apart looking at the sea and who had not yet spoken a word on the subject. "Why are you so quiet, my friend?" asked Jambavan. "Your strength, courage and wisdom are well known. You are the equal of Sugriva and the Princes of Ayodhya. You can fly like Garuda himself. The gods have bestowed on you varied gifts. The god of wind claims you as his own son. There is none here so qualified as you are to undertake this task. Arise, O Hanuman. This is not the time for modesty or for going into the background. The success of the expedition now depends entirely on you. Come forward and put hope and courage into our hearts."

Thus roused to action by the old Jambavan, the son of the god of wind, stood up several inches taller than he was. He gladly undertook the adventure, for he had confidence in his own powers. He looked around and saw that the place where they had assembled was too low and the

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ground too soft to stand his taking off. So he asked his friends to stay where they were and himself went up one of the peaks in the mountain range called Mahendra. He took off from there and flew over the sea towards Lanka.

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CHAPTER XXII

THE mountain shook as Hanuman took off from one of its peaks, so that the trees dropped their flowers on the ground and the serpents rushed out from their holes in terror. The valiant Vanara flew into the air with his face turned south and began his tremendous journey. There was the blue sky overhead and the blue ocean beneath. Between these two immensities he flew like an arrow shot by the prince himself. The gods in heaven and the nymphs of the sea came out to see his wonderful feat. The sea-god himself was stirred to his inmost depths and asked Mainaka, the winged mountain hiding within his waters, to rise and offer his summit as a resting-place for the hero. Hence arose from the sea, as by a miracle, right in front of the flying Vanara, a mighty mountain with a golden peak. But Hanuman, not knowing it was a friend who had come out to welcome him, thought it was an obstruction and struck him with his foot, so that Mainaka reeled for a moment and said, "The sea-god and I are your friends, O hero, not your foes. We wish to welcome and serve the emissary of the Prince of Ayodhya. Won't you rest for a while on my summit?" But Hanuman excused himself and said he could not pause in his flight, as he wished to

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reach Lanka before sunset. He then continued his journey across the sea. But the gods wanted to test his strength and asked Surasa, the mother of the Nagas, dwelling at the bottom of the sea, to come up and obstruct his passage. Surasa obeyed, and assuming the form of a Rakshasi of enormous size, stood in his way and said, "The gods are merciful to me to-day. They have sent you as food to me even without my asking for it. Come, enter into my mouth. It is open." But Hanuman pleaded that he was going on an urgent mission for the Prince of Ayodhya and that, after accomplishing his purpose, he would return and oblige her. The Rakshasi would not hear of this compromise and opened her mouth still wider and approached him. Hanuman had no time to fight her. So, he suddenly contracted his form to the dimensions of an inch and popped into her mouth and came out before she had time to close her ponderous jaws. He then triumphantly said to her, "I have done what you wanted me to do. I have entered into your mouth." She was pleased with the dodge he had played, and, assuming her real form as the Mother of the Nagas, blessed him and his enterprise and wished him godspeed. Hanuman was glad that he had not thought of fighting her and proceeded on his journey. But he had not

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gone very far before he came to a dead stop. He did not know the cause. He tried his best to push on. But something had deprived him of his power of motion and he was simply floating in the air. He looked all round. There was nothing there. He looked down and there he saw a mighty she-monster clutching his shadow which fell on the waters by her side, and by that means she was slowly dragging him to herself. Now Hanuman remembered that Sugriva had warned him against a monster in the southern seas, called Simhika, who was in the habit of dragging her victims down by clutching at their shadows. There was no doubt that this was she, and he had ample time as he went down to look through her open mouth, as through a cave, into her inwards. So as soon as he approached her he plunged into her mouth, and before the monster knew what was happening he, tore her heart away and flew up. The monster roared and died. Her dead body lay floating in her own blood. Hanuman then continued his journey. He met with no more obstacles. When he saw that he was approaching the enemy's country on the other side of the sea, he thought it safe to contract his body and alight as a tiny insignificant creature. And so he did. He noiselessly got down on a mountain top full of thorny ketaki

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bushes, amidst which were standing tall coconut trees.

The city of Lanka was situated on another and a far higher summit of the mountain range. So he had to traverse the valley between them and ascend another hill. It was a well-wooded place. The soil was rocky. But in the clefts of rocks grew up hardy trees of immense height, and where the ground broke up into small pebbles and rough sand, there was thick undergrowth interspersed in some places with creepers bearing fragrant flowers. As Hanuman passed through the valley he raised his eyes and saw sheer above him, in the clouds as it were, the famous city of many towers gleaming in the light of the setting sun. And a sad thought passed through his mind. He asked himself, even if Sita could be found there, what army from the other side of the ocean could come here and vanquish the lord of this city in the clouds? Of all the mighty hosts of the Vanara army there were perhaps only five or six who could fly over from the other side as he had done. But what could five or six do against this impregnable city and the embattled hosts of the Rakshasas guarding it? And even if Rama and Lakshmana could be brought here on the backs of some of them, what could they do against a host of Rakshasas fighting on their

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own soil and having the unlimited resources of their country at their back? There might be a chance if all the Vanara hosts could be thrown into the fight. But there was the impassable sea. How could it be crossed? It was a very depressing strain of thought. So the hero checked himself saying, "My present duty is to discover the Princess. Let me set about it now. I should not torture myself with other thoughts." By this time he had ascended the hill and reached the northern gate of the city. The sun had long set and in those southern climes the period of twilight was short. Moreover Hanuman was anxious to enter this far-famed city as soon as possible and begin his search. To escape attention he reduced himself still further to the size of a cat and stealthily tried to pass the gate. But suddenly before him stood a Rakshasi with fierce, threatening eyes and said, "Who are you? And where are you going? Answer me before I crush your life out of you." Hanuman, nothing daunted, replied, "I put you the same question. Who are you? And why do you stand in my way at this gate and threaten me with your looks?" "I am the servant of Ravana, the King of the Rakshasas," said the Rakshasi. "I am the guardian of Lanka. I am Lanka herself in flesh and blood. You cannot enter this city, while I am here. Now tell me who you are."

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"Out of curiosity have I come here," replied Hanuman. "I want to see this far-famed city, its high walls and battlements, its palaces and pleasure-gardens. And when I have satisfied my curiosity I will go away as I have come."

"Have I not already said that you can't enter here?" roared the Rakshasi and struck the Vanara, on his head with her palm. Hanuman yelled with pain, but recovering himself in a moment pounced upon her and dealt such a hard blow with his fist that she fell down crushed in every limb. Considering her sex he took no advantage of her fall. Moreover the Rakshasi begged for mercy and said, "You have vanquished me, O Vanara. I remember now. That means the city of Lanka is vanquished. This is only the beginning of the end. Death and destruction await this city ruled by a wicked king who has abducted Sita, the Princess of Ayodhya. Go your way, O Vanara, and do what you like. Destiny is on your side."

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CHAPTER XXIII

HANUMAN then cautiously entered the city and went along the main streets guarded by fearful Rakshasa soldiers with drawn swords. He saw that Lanka was a city of palaces. On every side there were abundant signs of wealth, luxury and enjoyment. From every building he could hear the laughter of ladies, the jingling of their ornaments and the music of various instruments. The palaces were of different designs and colours and were most lavishly furnished and brilliantly lighted. Hanuman was reminded of the palace of gold underground, where he and his companions had been entertained by Svayamprabha. But here in this city of Ravana there were hundreds and thousands of palaces that could compare favourably with that palace. He remembered what Sampati had told him and his friends—that the city was originally built by Visvakarma, the architect of the gods, for Kubera, the king of the Yakshas. No wonder it was like the city of the gods. Hanuman was, however, for sometime lost in amazement. His own Kishkindha was only a den compared to this wonderful city, with its palaces of gold and silver, its broad pavements of marble, its tall ornamental towers and its well-kept gardens stocked with rare trees and birds. Soon after he entered

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the city, the moon rose in the east and the white moonlight together with the deep shadows cast by the high buildings added to the charm of the scene. The streets were full of pleasure-seekers gaily dressed and driving their chariots made of ivory interspersed with coral, the two articles for which Lanka was famous in those days. On ivory seats in public parks, of which there was a considerable number in the city, Hanuman saw voluptuous lovers sitting at ease and enjoying the cool breeze from the sea. He moved unnoticed in all these places to ascertain whether he could find the princess or hear any news about her. But he neither saw nor heard anything to the purpose.

He now wanted to enter Ravana's own palace and search every nook and corner of it and see whether he could get any information. The king's palace was a city within a city. It was marked off from the rest of Lanka by a high compound wall ornamented with turrets in which stood guards with uniforms and with drawn swords in their hands. The interspaces between the turrets were patrolled by soldiers fully armed with bayonet, club and dagger. Hanuman, however, like a cat, stealthily dodged these ferocious guards and entered the enclosure. It was several miles in circumference and there were hundreds of buildings

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within—the assembly hall, the council chamber, the official residence of His Majesty, his private palace, the palaces of all the queens, the quarters of the officials, the houses of the guards, the servant lines, the royal stables, the chariot-houses and that lofty structure where Ravana's renowned aerial car, Pushpaka, was kept. Hanuman began to search all these buildings carefully one by one.

By the time he entered the royal enclosure it was already late in the night. People had retired to rest and so he had facilities to observe the features of every one in sleep and see whether they corresponded with the description of the princess he had received from Rama and Lakshmana. He examined the features of hundreds of lovely women, sleeping in various poses in the apartments of Ravana's queens, noted their beautiful ornaments and watched the gentle movements of their silks and shawls as they breathed in sleep. None of them answered to the description of the princess. In the outer courts and verandahs he saw only hideous looking Rakshasis in sleep, heard their snores, felt their offensive breath and passed by in haste. At last with redoubled caution he approached Ravan's own bed-chamber. In the outer hall, musicians, whose duty it was to play soft, sleep-inducing music throughout the night were nodding

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and dozing, each bending over his or her instrument. A short flight of steps on either side of this hall led to a spacious suite of rooms with deep verandahs in a circular design, each leading by means of curiously wrought steps of marble into the garden below. These rooms were arranged in pairs, provided with moveable curtains made of cloth of gold and furnished with unparalleled splendour. In one of these rooms Hanuman saw Ravana sleeping, his dark form stretched on a golden couch set with precious stones and covered with high beds of silk-cotton and shawls of the finest wool and hung with garlands of fresh flowers. At his head was the insignia of his power, his white umbrella, hung all over with pearls of the first water. His arms were long and plump, each like the trunk of an elephant and bearing bracelets of gold set with diamonds. His palms lying bare on the counterpane were furrowed with long lines indicative of sovereignty, power and wealth. His broad and hairy chest was indented by many a weal, the consequence of his numerous fights with the gods and demigods in the worlds above as well as with wild animals on earth. Though he was in deep sleep, the pupils of his eyes underneath their lids seemed to be restless and the fingers of his hands were twitching. His deep quick breathing was like the hissing of the hooded cobra.

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Hanuman hovered over this sleeping form for a moment and hastily withdrew into a corner thinking it was too risky. He then went into the next room curtained off from this, and there he found, amidst equally gorgeous surroundings and on a couch of dazzling splendour, a lady of delicate features, of the colour of sovereign gold, clad in white silk, with flowers in her hair and with a long diamond necklace hanging loose from her neck and spread out on the bed as she lay in sleep. Hanuman hastily concluded that she was the princess he was in search of and danced with joy and congratulated himself on his object being accomplished. But a moment's thought convinced him how extremely foolish it was on his part to have mistaken this lady for the princess. How could he expect the Princess of Ayodhya torn from the prince to be sleeping happily amidst these surroundings with flowers in her hair? No, no. This lady was probably the chief queen, the wedded wife of Ravana. And he must search for Sita elsewhere. So he came out of the circular suite of rooms, noiselessly jumped into the garden and began to despair of finding the princess that night.

He sat under a tree to take breath and consider the position. Various tormenting thoughts came into his mind damping his spirits. He had searched for the princess in all likely places and

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could find no trace of her. Was she really alive and in Lanka? Or had she fallen into the sea slipping from the hands of her captor, while crossing over to Lanka? Or had she starved herself to death unable to bear her sorrow and despairing of any rescue? Or had Ravana already put her to death, seeing he could not bend her to his wishes? Amidst these torturing thoughts came the happy recollection of what Sampati had said. Did not Sampati say that he actually saw with his vulture's eye the princess here in Lanka and within the precincts of Ravana's palace? If so, where was she? He had searched all the palaces and other buildings in the royal enclosure and could find no trace of her. But Sampati's words could not be untrue. The princess must be there in Lanka. So Hanuman resolved never to quit that city till he found her. It was better to die here than to go back without any news of her.

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CHAPTER XXIV

HAVING thus made up his mind he moved to the southern side of the park and saw at a distance a cluster of Asoka trees and amidst them a building which he had not seen before. He proceeded thither praying to the gods in heaven that he might find the princess there. What appeared to be only a cluster of Asoka trees from a distance was really an extensive grove, the favourite pleasure resort of the ladies of the royal household. Besides Asoka trees, which formed its characteristic feature and from which it derived its name, there were hundreds of other trees. All of them were now in flower, as it was early spring, so that their fragrance extended to a considerable distance from the grove. There were creepers too of various kinds covering arbours of lattice work made of silver. The seats around the trunks of trees and in the shady bowers were made either of ivory or of coral to match the colours of the surrounding flowers. Beside every bower was a fountain constructed of the purest marble and adorned with the statuary of water-nymphs. There was an artificial winding rivulet flowing through the entire grove, supplying water to the numerous ponds where lotuses and lilies of various colours grew in great profusion. These ponds had flights of circular

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steps all around made of basalt and interspersed with seats of greystone. There were artificial hillocks too, with gentle slopes and grassy paths, so that ladies could easily walk up and have their exercise. Some of them were provided with grottos, where those who were tired while walking could sit and take rest in the shade. A different sort of recreation was afforded by the swinging planks of sandal-wood attached to the branches of big trees by chains of silver. There were also large pits of the finest golden sand, where nurses could sit and make the children of the royal household play. But the most attractive feature of the grove was the central building resting on a thousand pillars, with its walls of silver, its seats of gold and its steps of coral and ivory. In the white moonlight it shone like Mount Kailasa, the abode of Siva and Parvati.

Hanuman was lost in amazement as he traversed this paradise on earth. It was a moonlight night with not a speck of cloud in the sky. The tall trees and the hillocks cast deep shadows on the ground. Where the shadows made his form invisible he walked briskly looking this way and that; and where the ground was open to the sky he crept in the grass from bush to bush to escape attention. In places where the trees were close and

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had extensive branches he thought it was safer to climb up and leap from branch to branch. But he found that by doing so he awoke the sleeping birds which flew up breaking the stillness of the night with their cries. Whenever this happened, he had, to sit still among the leaves, till the noise subsided and then creep warily along the branches. But apparently there was none to take notice of his movements. It was past midnight and there was not a soul to be seen. He had searched all the bowers and grottos and all the smaller buildings, of which there was a great number in the grove. His hope now lay in the central building fashioned like a temple and resting on a thousand pillars. He approached it with great caution, and looked with awe and wonder on its dazzling splendour.

As he was about to enter it with noiseless steps, he was startled to hear a moan expressive of great pain and anguish. He stood still not knowing what it meant. Again he heard the same sound accompanied this time with a deep sigh. As it seemed to come not from the building but from behind, he turned round and beheld at a little distance from the building some one sitting under a spreading Asoka tree with the head bent down as if in the act of weeping silently. And all around this figure, there seemed to be a number of people lying down

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motionless as in sleep. He therefore turned away from the building and noiselessly climbed the nearest tree and moved from branch to branch till he was very close to the scene. Hiding himself among the leaves above he now began to survery the figures on the ground. He at once saw that all of them were women. Those who were lying down and sleeping were hideous in the extreme, their bestial faces showing that they were Rakshasis of the lowest rank. He had never seen such horrible features before. He turned away with loathing and disgust from them and looked at the central figure and began to scan her appearance. He could not see her face as she was looking down. But the general outlines of her figure showed that she was a lady of the highest rank plunged in deep sorrow and enduring the extremes of fear, anguish and despair like a hunted creature of the woods. She was thin and emaciated, with no ornaments, no toilet, no change of clothing, dishevelled and absolutely careless of her appearance. But through all the disorder and untidiness of sorrow shone her marvellous beauty which was of the spirit within. To Hanuman, she appeared like the flaming fire on the altar enveloped with smoke. And when she raised her face, wet with tears, to heaven, as if she was praying for relief, his heart melted in pity lifting him for a moment above

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the plane of mortal being. Gazing on her, Hanuman felt he grew divine and became a transformed being. This experience profoundly altered his life. He became an immortal, as it were. And henceforth service to her became the sole principle of his existence. He instinctively felt that this was the princess he was in search of. Not in royal palaces, not in the lap of luxury and comfort was she to be found, but on the bare ground, under the shade of a tree and in penance and prayer. Hanuman thought it was worth while crossing one hundred yojanas of the black waters to see her. It was worthwhile for Kishkindha to go to war with Lanka for her sake. The princess was indeed the worthy consort of the Prince of Ayodhya. And even if the prince were to turn the earth upside down for her sake, he would be justified. Hanuman, now remembered the bundle of jewels which the princess threw on the Rishyamuka mountain and which he picked up and gave to Sugriva. He remembered the yellow piece of silk in which the ornaments were bound and he now saw that the princess was still wearing the same cloth from which that piece had been torn. This was proof positive, even if there were no other proofs, such as the features described to him by Rama and Lakshmana, that this was the Princess of

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Ayodhya. His doubts were set at rest. His search was over. It only remained for him to take some opportunity of approaching her unobserved and giving her the glad news that Rama and Lakshmana were taking steps to rescue her.

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CHAPTER XXV

WHILE Hanuman was thus congratulating himself on the success that had crowned his efforts, he suddenly heard the music of the orchestra at Ravana's palace signifying that the last quarter of the night had begun. At the sound of the music the hideous Rakshasi women awoke in their places and were on the alert, watching their prisoner, and Hanuman sat motionless among the leaves, lest he should attract their attention. In a few minutes they heard the noise of footsteps of a number of people approaching the grove from the side of the palace. They craned their necks to know who those untimely visitors were and saw a number of twinkling lights and a procession of women whose jewels scattered rays of light.

"The King, the King," the Rakshasis cried and stood at attention.

It was in fact the king of the Rakshasas. He awoke from his bed when the orchestra played and, was tempted by the god of love to go and see the princess in the Asoka grove. He ordered some of the fair women of his harem to accompany him so that they might second his efforts, and play the part that tame elephants do in capturing a wild elephant. On hearing his summons they tumbled out of their beds and came to him—some with

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silver lamps to light him on his way, some with golden vessels of wine with which he could refresh himself and some with drawn swords to blazon forth his authority and power. The procession marched along the avenues of the grove, with the tipsy king at their head, and reached the place where the unhappy princess was sitting and weeping. Hanuman warily crept along the tree and went up higher and began to peer below through leaves and flowers. And Sita, when she knew that her captor was once again coming to assail her, trembled like a plantain tree in a thunder storm and shrank within herself covering her bosom with her thighs and knees. The king of the Rakshasas approached her with the women of his harem and said, "Why do you shrink from me and cover your bosom with your beautiful thighs, O fair one? I wish to evoke your love, not your fear. And why do you neglect your person like this, why do you prefer to remain unkempt and haggard? Your unsurpassed loveliness is already fading away. You are wasting your youth which is the time of enjoyment. Youth once wasted will not come back. You have enslaved my heart, and, yet you reject the worship it offers you. All these fair women and hundreds more whom I have brought from different lands will be at your service

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accepting you as their queen and mistress. My whole kingdom as well as my royal household will obey your orders. Come, O fair one, you have nothing to fear from me. You can order me about and rule this land. Why do you always pine for him who can never come here? He can never know where you are. You have waited all these months in vain hope. You may wait till the end of your life. I assure you it is not possible for mortal man to cross the ocean and come into this impregnable city of mine. Even the gods dare not approach it. You have not yet seen the strength, the wealth and the beauty of Lanka. You refuse to stir out. You refuse to reside even in the White Palace assigned to you and choose to live here under this tree exposed to sun and rain. Do tell me, O fair one, in what ways I can please you and win your heart. Lay down the conditions and I will satisfy you."

In this way the impassioned Rakshasa went on pleading before his prisoner to the surprise of many of the women who accompanied him. They could not understand his fatal fascination for this fragile woman. They knew the worth of all those promises he was so eloquently making. They had once been foolishly captivated by similar promises and after a moment's pleasure been added to the

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growing numbers of his harem. They knew, moreover,that, if he had the power to lay violent hands on his victims and bend them to his pleasure, he would not have wasted a minute in making love to them. For he was under a curse and the moment he laid violent hands on unwilling women he would meet with instantaneous death. However, they feared the tyrant and dared not express their sympathy for the princess even by a look or gesture. They meekly obeyed his will and appeared solicitous even about his most unlawful pleasures. They stood around him like his body-guard, some waving fly-whisks before him, as if he were a god, some pouring out wine for him and offering it in vessels of gold and some trimming their lamps for him, because the moon in the western sky was now fading.

The princess had turned away in anger and digust from this scene. She had the whole company almost at her back now. When her tormentor ceased to speak and paused for a reply, she said in low accents, "How often have I to tell you, sir, that you are doing yourself no good in thus turning your mind to a married woman? Turn your mind to your own wives and make good all the promises you have made to them. Just as you would like your own wives to be pure in mind and faithful to you, so

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should you not like to see the wives of others pure in mind and faithful to their husbands? This is an elementary virtue on the part of any married man. Are there no elders in your wide kingdom who can teach you this, even if you do not know it yourself? There must be; probably you have set at naught their words to work out your own destruction and the destruction of your kingdom and race. Even now it is not too late If you want to live and rule over this kingdom of yours, there is only one way. Return me to my lord, the Prince of Ayodhya and beg his pardon. He is generous to a fault and forgiving by nature. He will protect even with his life those who seek his shelter. But if you persist in your evil course, you will fall by his hand. You may escape from the anger of Indra who wields the thunderbolt, you may escape even from the noose of Yama, the god of death, but you cannot escape from the arrows of the Prince of Ayodhya, the champion of Dharma. It is an idle dream of yours that the Prince cannot find you. It is the dream of every thief who tries to escape from justice. I see you are startled at the word 'thief'. But what else are you? Have you not stolen me from my husband's house when he was away? Had you the courage to face him in an open fight? You had heard how my husband, single-handed, had routed

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Khara and Dooshana, your brothers, with all their army of fourteen thousand Rakshasas, and like a coward unwilling to risk your life you resorted to a stratagem. Having drawn off my husband by some foul Rakshasa magic of yours, you entered my house in Panchavati in the guise of a holy man and, when I dutifully entertained you as an honoured guest, you treacherously violated the sacred laws of hospitality and seized me by force and ran away from the spot. I ask you and all these ladies who have come with you—'Is this worthy of a king?' I am the daughter of a famous king and the daughter-in-law of another famous king. Kings with us are the standards of Dharma. They suffer even indignities to keep their subjects in the path of virtue. They ever set an example to them. What an example are you setting, O King of the Rakshasas, to the people of Lanka! As far as I am concerned, I told you, sir, on the very day you brought me into these palaces of yours that your wealth and your power were mere dust in my eyes, and I repeat it now. I belong to the Prince of Ayodhya, my husband, as the rays of the sun belong to the sun. I am his and his alone, entirely and eternally, and no power on earth can separate us who are one in mind and spirit."

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"I see," said Ravana who was red in the face and was bridling his anger with great difficulty, "I see that the more I try to conciliate you the more you insult me. Every word you have uttered now is an insult to me and calls for capital punishment. My desire for you has till now held in check my anger. I have already fixed a time limit for my patience. There are still two months to run. At the end of that time you either come to bed with me or become my food on the breakfast table. There is no third course for you. Don't forget that you are absolutely in my power."

These terrible words of Ravana frightened the ladies who were surrounding him. Tears stood in their eyes and they made secret gestures to the princess showing their sympathy. But the princess was not cowed down. Brave in the spotless purity of her heart she hurled once more her defiance at the aggressor.

"I see there is none here who wishes your welfare," said she, "none who can turn you from your evil course. I wonder why that tongue of yours, which has uttered such unholy, sacrilegous words to me, the daughter of Janaka, has not dropped down from your mouth. I wonder why those cruel lustful eyes of yours have not been plucked by some one and thrown on the ground. I

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could curse you from the bottom of my heart and make you dust and ashes, but I have not the permission of my husband to do so."

Ravana's fury against the princess now knew no bounds. Flashing fire from his eyes he sprang on her like an angry serpent, threatening destruction. "Here and now will I destroy you," cried he, foaming at the mouth, "as the morning sun destroys darkness."

But his hand was seized by Dhanyamali, one of his wives, who had accompanied him.

"Come, O King of the Rakshasas", she gently said to him. "Why do you waste yourself on that pale wretched woman? She does not deserve your attention. She is not destined by the Creator to enjoy all the pomp and power that you have so generously offered her. What pleasure would you derive in desiring a creature who fears and hates you? There are many of us in your own palace who love you and give you pleasure. Come, my lord, let us go."

So saying she gently led away Ravana from the grove. And he too was pleased to be extricated from the difficult situation in which he had either to commit murder or lose face with his own people.

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CHAPTER XXVI

RAVANA'S departure afforded little relief to the princess, for she was now assailed on all sides by those hideous Rakshasis who surrounded her. Their duty was to bend the will of Sita to the pleasures of their king. Now that their king had clear proof that they had done nothing towards the purpose for which they were chosen, they were afraid that he would punish them and began to redouble their efforts.

"Why dont't you listen to us, O fair lady?" cried one of them. "You cant't get a better husband in all the three worlds than the high-born King of the Rakshasas, the son of Visravas and the grandson of Pulastya, who was Brahma's own spiritual offspring."

"What is your difficulty," cried another, "in accepting our King who is the richest and the most powerful monarch of this earth? Your Rama, who is an exile and a wanderer in the woods—is there any comparison between him and the King of Lanka? And moreover what hope is there of his reaching this place? Perhaps he is already dead."

"You are a fool," said a third, "to be ever pining for a man who is dead and losing this excellent opportunity of becoming the Queen of Lanka and enjoying boundless wealth and power.

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Have you ever seen our palatial aerial car, Pushpaka? It will become your own when you become the Queen, and you can go to any part of the world with the King in a moment, as it were."

In these and a hundred other ways they assailed the poor princess. She was quite exhausted with the effort she had made to stand against Ravana and had little energy to face these wolfish women. Breaking down and unable to answer these questions, she simply siad, "Alas, alas! what a pity it is that it does not occur to your minds what sin you are committing by making these suggestions to me! Do what you like with me. I will not listen to your insults."

So saying she walked away from them and reached the tree on which Hanuman was perched. But that pack of Rakshasi wolves would not leave her alone. They pursued her there. A Rakshasi called Vinata said to her, "I am glad, O Sita, that so far you have shown your faithfulness to your man. But that is enough. You should not go too far in anything. They say that moderation in all things will lead to happiness. Every virtue becomes a vice when it is practised to an immoderate degree. So take my advice and trun back on your asceticism. Enjoy the riches of Lanka and begin to practise faithfulness to Ravana now in place of Rama. Or

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else we will kill you one of these days without waiting for the full two months you have been promised."

Another called Vikata clenched her first at the princess and roared, "You stupid woman, how long are you going to try our patience? How long have we to din it into your ears that it is impossible for that fool of your husband to cross the ocean and come into this impregnable city of Lanka ruled by the King of the Rakshasas? Stop your foolish tears, I say, and put your youth and beauty to some use. Don't you see that it is for your own good, your own happiness, that we are advising you? Will you listen to me and say, 'yes', or shall I pluck out your heart and eat it raw?"

A third called Chandodary rushed at her with a pike in her hand, saying, "There is no use. From the beginning it has been obvious to me that she is a perverse creature and is fit only to be eaten. I have a great desire to rip her up and taste her liver and spleen as well as that tiny little heart of hers."

A fourth called Praghasa suggested, "I say, let us wring her neck and be done with her. Let us then report to the King that she is dead and then I am sure he will say, "Divide the body and take each a part."

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The idea of killing and dividing acted like a spur on the imagination of the cannibal crew. A Rakshasi, with the face of a goat, smacked her lips and said, "We shall provide ourselves with good honey and liquor as an addition to our repast. It is long since I tasted human flesh. But I warn you. The division must be equal. I don't like any quarrels afterwards."

"I agree," cried a hideous hook-nosed Rakshasi. "Nothing like human flesh and sweet wine to drown cares and sorrows. After our repast we shall go and dance in the temple of our deity Nikumbhila at the western gate."

Thus sorely beset by these wolves, the princess did not know what to do. Her reason began to totter on its throne. She feared she might go mad. She sometimes lay down and rolled on the ground in her pain. Sometimes she sat burying her face in her hands, and sometimes she stood up desperately clinging to a branch of the tree and facing her foes. But she got little relief. The tumult in her mind was indescribable. "I can't bear this any longer," she moaned to herself. "I do not know what sins I have committed in my former life that I am punished in this manner? And will there ever be an end to all this? Does my lord know now where I am and what I am enduring? Every

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one here says that it is impossible for him to cross the ocean and come to Lanka. It is true he can't fly as that foul Rakshasa does. He may find other means. But he may come too late and find no trace of me. O my husband, I can't hold on any longer. I have come to the limit of my endurance. O for a cup of poison that will end all my pain! Why should I prolong my wretched life for two months more and die under the butcher's knife?"

But she could not think coherently for any length of time. She knew that her mind was going to pieces and now and then tried to rally her strength. But it was impossible; she felt like a drowning man, and the only straw she could clutch at was the name of Rama. So sometimes she would close her eyes, refuse to think and mechanically go on pronouncing her husband's sacred name like a saving mantra. But the thoughts of her perilous situation would intrude on her meditations and the old terrors would make shipwreck of her resolution in a moment. And there were the incessant threats and insults of the Rakshasis ringing in her ears and making it impossible even for a moment to concentrate her attention on anything. Stark despair seized her mind and paralysed her limbs. She had been hoping

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that some message would come to her—she did not know how—from her husband that he knew where she was and that he was making efforts to rescue her. But month had passed after month and no message came. The rainy season had come and gone. Autumn and winter duly followed. It was now spring. And hope which comes to all in that season of flowers had not come to her famished heart. Were Rama and Lakshmana still alive in that dreadful forest of Dandaka infested with wild beasts and Rakshasas? What would happen to her if they had already been murdered by the agents of Ravana? O evil day on which that hateful Rakshasi, Surpanakha, came to Panchavati! Her sorrows began from that day. She had warned her husband against antagonising the Rakshasas of the forest unnecessarily. But he would not listen to her. He had his high purpose in life. She would not for a moment blame him. But it had to be paid for in anguish and suffering. Was ever a woman tried as she was? She had endured the hardships of forest life for thirteen years and was hoping to go back to Ayodhya with Rama and Lakshmana. How all those hopes were now dashed to the ground! What a stony heart she had that would not break to pieces under the weight of all this suffering! Separated from her

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beloved husband she thought she could never live even for a day. But months had passed and yet she was alive. O how she wished she had slipped from the hand of the demon and fallen into the ocean when she was being taken as a prisoner to that cursed place! That would have been a swift and merciful death for her.

But these sad reflections were ever punctuated with the instinctive cry of her heart, "Come, come, O my beloved lord. I have been waiting for you night and day. When will you come, when will you come, O Ramachandra?" And when the attacks of the Rakshasis became unbearable, she cried and said to them, "I have no desire to live, O ladies. You may kill me, you may cut me to pieces and eat me if you like. But say no more those evil things you are saying. You can never bend me to your will. I will not touch your king even with the toe of my left foot, for it would be pollution. You as well as your king will pay for all these horrible sins of yours. My husband is a born champion of Dharma. When he comes here with his brother, he will destory this nest of reptiles which you call Lanka. Carrion birds will hover over your city. Your streets will be strewn with the dead and the dying. And there will be lamentation in every home. This city is doomed."

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The Rakshasis were a little startled when they heard these words which sounded like a prophecy. They rallied, however, in a short time and were preparing for another assault, when Trijata, an old Rakshasi, who had been sleeping till now, awoke and checked them. "Desist, O Rakshasis," she cried, "trouble her no more. I have had a marvellous dream which signifies, I think the triumph of Sita and her husband and the complete destruction of Lanka. Leave her alone and come here, I will relate it to you."

This call from their friend coming so close on the prophetic words of the princess unnerved the evil women and made them anxious to hear the fateful dream. So they assembled under another tree leaving the princess free for sometime and asked Trijata to narrate her dream.

"I saw in my dream," said Trijata, "an ivory car in the air drawn by a thousand swans and in it were seated Rama and Lakshmana clothed in white silk and wearing white garlands. They came to Lanka to meet the Princess, who, similarly robed and garlanded, was standing on the peak of a white mountain. I saw again Rama and Lakshmana riding an elephant with four tusks and approaching the white mountain where Sita was standing. Rama extended his hand and helped Sita to mount the

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elephant. She got up and sat in his lap and they flew over Lanka in a northern direction and seemed to disappear among the stars.

"At the same time I saw Ravana, our king, clothed in garments of the colour of blood and wearing flowers of a similar hue. He was bereft of the hair on his head and was out of his mind. Seated on the back of an ass he started southwards, but fell headlong on the way. There was a rope round his neck and a woman in black got hold of it and dragged him away in the southern direction. A similar fate befell Kumbhakarna, his brother, and also Indrajit and the other sons of Ravana. All of them were driven south, soaked in oil, wearing blood-red flowers, and all out of their minds. But I saw Vibhishana alone clad in white and wearing white garlands, seated on the back of a huge elephant with four tusks. All around him people were singing and dancing. He appeared to be at the head of a triumphant procession.

"But the most dreadful thing in my dream was the destruction of Lanka. Its palaces and towers were broken and overthrown, its chariots, horses and elephants were scattered in all directions, and I saw bands of women weeping and beating their breasts and wandering amidst the ruins."

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As Trijata went on relating her dream, terror seized the hearts of her listeners and there was absolute silence for a time when she finished.

"Therefore, I say." concluded Trijata, "don't provoke the Princess any more. A time may come when we may all be at her mercy. Let us wait on the march of events. There are only two months more."

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CHAPTER XXVII

WHEN the Rakshasis withdrew to listen to Trijata's dream, the princess was once more thrown into the depths of despondency. What would happen to her at the end of two months if her husband did not come? That was the terrible question that oppressed her mind and gave her no respite. Was she to die under the butcher's knife? O what an end for the Princess of Ayodhya, the daughter of the world-famous Janaka! What an end to all the excruciating sufferings of these ten months! In her agony she began to curse herself for having desired to possess the golden deer in the forest, for having asked Rama to go in search of that magic beast and, above all, for having so thoughtlessly, so foolishly and in such unpardonable language, bidden Lakshmana go away leaving her alone. She had brought it all on herself. The memory of that unhappy day was too much for her and she began to cry, "O Rama, O Lakshmana, I am unworthy of you indeed. But take pity on me who am dying in this for-off land and come. O my beloved lord, come, come, come. Come to me on, the wings of thought that I may see you before I die. Or send one word of love into my heart, wherever you are, so that I may die peacefully. I cannot endure this agony any longer."

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So saying the unhappy princess caught hold of her long trailing hair and twisted it tightly round her neck to put an end to her life. Now her left eye began to throb, her left shoulder twitched and her robe of faded silk began to flutter and droop. She knew these were the signs of coming good fortune and stayed her hands and began to think

Meanwhile Hanuman who had been witnessing these scenes from his position on the tree and who had been long debating within himself how best he could announce himself to the distressed princess, saw his opportunity when the Rakshasis withdrew and resolved first to inspire confidence in her by narrating within her hearing the history of the prince from the beginning. After touching upon the incidents of Rama's life up to the abduction of the princess, he proceeded to say how Rama then made friends with Sugriva, the chief of the Vanaras, how he killed Vali and placed Sugriva on the throne, how Sugriva sent out bands of Vanaras to get news of Sita and how Sampati, the brother of Jatayu, directed the southern band to cross over to Lanka and see the princess.

"Here I am now," concluded Hanuman. "I have crossed the ocean on Sampati's advice. I have searched all Lanka, and fortunate I am that I see the Princess of Ayodhya under this tree. She

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answers to the description given to me personally by the Prince, her husband."

The Princess was astonished to hear these words and looked up and saw the diminutive form of the Vanara perched on a branch of the tree. She was frightened and puzzled, and for a time thought it was a dream. She rubbed her eyes and looked again and found the Vanara still there. Moreover she had not slept and how could she have a dream? Again, the Vanara had said something about the prince's doings after her abduction. She had no knowledge of them. And so how could she have dreamt of them? Dream or no dream, she wished that what the Vanara had said was true. When Hanuman saw that his words had made some impression on the mind of the princess and that she had somewhat overcome her fear, he gently alighted near her and asked her who she was, whether she was a goddess or a heavenly nymph or an earthly princess.

"From your sorrow and your tears, O lady, I take you to be a Princess," he added. "If so, tell me, O Princess, whether you are Sita, the wedded wife of Rama, the Prince of Ayodhya."

"Yes," said the princess, "my name is Sita. I am the wife of the Prince of Ayodhya. I am the daughter of Janaka and the daughter-in-law of

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Dasaratha. You seem to know my husband. May I know who you are?"

"I am the messenger of Rama, O Princess," he replied, respectfully folding his hands in salutation. "By his command I have come to see you. He is safe. He sends his greetings to you. And Lakshmana, his brother, sends his respects to you."

The words of Hanuman sent a thrill of joy through the heart of the princess and she was anxious to know more about Rama and Lakshmana. The Vanara, therefore, went nearer to give the details of his message, so that the Rakshasis might not overhear their conversation. This was rather unfortunate,for it once more aroused her suspicions that the Vanara might be only Ravana in disguise or a peice of Rakshasa magic like the golden deer in the Dandaka forest. She shrank from him in terror and begged him to leave an unfortunate woman alone and not torment her any further that day. Hanuman thereupon prostrated himself before her in the dust and assured her in a thousand ways that he was not a Rakshasa, but a Vanara sent by the prince to her with a message.

"Tell me then." said the princess, "the distinguishing marks of my husband so that I may know whether you have seen him."

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Hanuman then gave a long and eloquent description of the prince—his features, his complexion, his voice, his gait and his character. Sita was satisfied and then asked him when and where he met the prince first and how Sugriva became his friend.

"You remember, O Princess," began Hanuman, "how you dropped a bundle of jewels while you were being carried away by Ravana. That bundle fell on the Rishyamuka mountain by the side of Sugriva, when I and three other Vanaras were sitting with him. We examined the bundle and, seeing that it contained a lady's jewels, carefully preserved it in a cave so that it might be returned to the owner at the proper time After some time, when the Prince of Ayodhya and his brother came to the mountain searching for you, we came to know your story and at once produced the jewels before the Prince. Oh! how can I describe the Prince's feelings when he saw them! He placed them sometimes in his lap, sometimes on his breast and sometimes on his lips and broke down and wept in such a piteous manner that we could not restrain our tears. Believe me, O Princess, your husband is pining for you, as much as you are for him. He finds no pleasure in anything. He eats very little. He scarcely sleeps. He only

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dozes a little at night and then starts up calling you by your name. He is ever so preoccupied with thoughts of you that he does not know if ants crawl over him or insects bite him."

"Your words are both nectar and poison to me, O Vanara," interrupted the princess. "I am delighted to hear that my lord pines for me, but I am grieved to know that he is so unhappy. But go on with your story."

Hanuman then narrated in greater detail what he had already briefly mentioned, while he was perched on the tree, and concluded thus:—

"I have witnessed with my own eyes your sufferings this night, O lady, and will duly communicate them to the Prince. But I assure you the end of these Rakshasas is near. It will not be long before the Prince and his valiant brother and Sugriva and his Vanara hosts will come here and destroy this city and take you back in triumph. Now I hope, O Princess, you believe that I am a true messenger from the Prince, your husband. If you still have any doubts, please look at this ring with the Prince's name inscribed on it. He has given it to me to be shown to you as a token of recognition."

So saying he placed the ring in her hands. Her face shone when she saw that familiar ornament.

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She felt a thrill passing through her body and she blushed and bent her head as if her husband was near. She silently looked at the ring for a long time and then, turning to Hanuman, said, "You are brave, valiant and wise, O best of Vanaras, you have crossed the sea one hundred yojanas wide and, have dared to enter this city of the Rakshasas single-handed. My lord has sent me the fittest messenger. I have every confidence in you. Come, tell me more about my lord, the Prince. I trust he is not wasting himself away on my account. I hope his grief will not prevent him from doing what he ought to do now. I hope he will not lose the strength of his arm nor weaken his resolution against the foe."

"There is no fear of that, my lady," said Hanuman. "The Prince is not yet here, because he does not know that you are here. As soon as I go and tell him where you are, he will start with all the Vanara hosts. Nothing can stand in his way, no, not the ocean, nor these Rakshasas. I assure you it will not be long before you see your husband in Lanka."

"You should particularly tell him of the time limit of two months set by the foul tyrant," said Sita. "The sooner the better. I cannot stand this strain for more than a month. You have seen how

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I am being assailed. There is not one in this ill-fated place who has any kind feelings towards me, except Vibhishana, Ravana's brother. His wife sent word to me the other day by her daughter that he was frequently urging his brother to set me free and send me back. But Ravana is obdurate and would not listen to his advice. You have heard the unspeakable alternatives which that monster flung at me to-night."

Here the princess broke down and wept as she remembered the outrageous insults of Ravana. And Hanuman tried to pacify her.

"There will be an end to all your troubles very soon, O Princess. The moment I return to the Prince and give the information, he will march against Lanka with a large army. You need have no doubts that he will be here within a month. Or, if you have no objection, O lady, I can give you immediate relief by carrying you on my back across the sea and placing you before the Prince, as the god of fire carries the scared *havis* to the God of gods. You need not hesitate, seeing my present diminutive form. This form I have specially assumed in this place to escape detection. We Vanaras can assume any form we like. I can now become as big as an elephant and carry you safely on my back. You may discourse with the sun and

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the moon as you ride.. And I can fly. back as easily as I flew here."

The princess was astonished and gladdened at this novel proposal. And to inspire confidence in her Hanuman began to magnify his form before her very eyes. She gazed on him with wonder and said, "I know your strength and courage, O Vanara chief. My husband would not have sent you on this perilous journey, if you had not been a hero with extraordinary powers. But I am afraid your proposal is open to many objections. First of all, you may fly fearlessly, but what about me? Can I hold on to my seat as you fly across the ocean? I am not sure. I may get nervous and drop down and be drowned. Again, when the Rakshasas see you flying away, they may attack you with deadly weapons in the air. And you will have to fight them with a burden on your back. That would be extremely hazardous for both of us. But my greatest objection is this. If you carry me away successfully from Lanka, it will no doubt redound to your glory, but it will, I fear, detract from the glory of my lord and husband. The better course would be for the Prince to come here with an army and defeat the Rakshasas in open battle and take me back in triumph. I don't want to be as stealthily carried away from here as I was brought here.

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Ravana is a theif, but I want my husband to be a hero."

"None but you can speak like this, O Princess of Ayodhya", cried Hanuman. "A worthy spouse of a worthy Prince! I bow before you. What is your command then? What message shall I take from you to the Prince? But first of all kindly give me some tokens by which I may convince him that I have seen you and held converse with you."

"Gladly will I do so, O Vanara chief", said the princess. "Tell my lord that I still remember the incident of the crow at Chitrakuta. He will understand. And put him this question as from me: 'You have not hesitated to use the deadly missile of Brahma against such a small offender as that crow, and would you bear with patience this monstrous offender Ravana?' Tell my lord and Lakshmana, his noble brother, that at the most I can hold on to my wretched life here only for a month more. If they come after that, they come too late."

"You need have no fears on that account, my lady," replied Hanuman. "By everything that I hold sacred I promise we will be here before that time. So may I go? Have I your leave?"

"One thing more," cried the princess, "here is a material token which you may take to my Lord. It

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is a crest jewel which my father gave me at the time of my marriage. My husband will remember the occasion and will be put in mind, when he sees it, not only of myself as a bride but also of my mother, my father, and my father-in-law."

So saying she unbound a knot at the end of the garment of silk she was wearing and took out the jewel she had so carefully preserved and placed it in the hands of Hanuman. "In all my troubles", said the princess, "this gem has been my consolation. It has always reminded me of my eternal bridegroom and of my union with him in life or death. Tell my lord, therefore, that I am surrendering to him my last support in the hope that he will come here very soon."

Hanuman respectfully received the token, went round the princess in due form and prostrated himself before her and was preparing himself to leave when she said, "Can't you stay one day more, my friend? You may remain hidden in some secrect place to-day and take rest and go to-morrow. Your absence will aggravate my suffering, I am sure, by contrast. But I do not want to delay the day of my final deliverance. So I will not press my request. By the way, I have a doubt, O Hanuman. How is your Vanara army going to cross the ocean? Tell me if you have any plans."

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"My master Sugriva," replied Hanuman, "is a very determined general. He will devise some means for crossing the ocean. He has in his army hundreds of heroes of far greater strength, courage and wisdom than myself. You know when a king sends out scouts he will not send his best men. The best men are kept in reserve. All these reserves will be thrown into this war against Ravana."

"I don't know anything of your reserves, O Hanuman," said the princess, "but I now know you. I have every confidence in you. I am sure you will somehow bring my husband here. I count upon your wisdom and valour. Only remember the limit of one month. Let not my husband forget that. Give my love to him and my affection to Lakshmana. Take care of the token. Farewell."

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CHAPTER XXVIII

HANUMAN took leave of the princess and left her. But while he was going out of the Asoka grove, he thought within himself, "I have seen the Princess and am bearing a message back to the Prince. Thus I have done my duty, no doubt. But why should I not do something more? Why should I not try to find out the strength of these Rakshasas with whom my people have to wage a war? And why should I not try to meet their king face to face and find out his real intentions and incidentally show him a little of my strength? The best way of accomplishing these objects is probably to create a disturbance here and provoke the enemy to fight. But I should do so without in any way involving the Princess in it."

By this time he was near the northern gate of the grove. Instead of going out he turned a little to the east and began to uproot the trees, trample on the flower-beds and overthrow the roofs of the out-houses. The noise attracted the attention of the Rakshasa guards and soon there was a big crowd armed with sticks and stones. But Hanuman magnified his form and charged against them so furiously that they ran away in all directions uttering hideous cries. Then he went on with his work of destruction. Soon the north-eastern quarter of the grove was

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reduced to a chaos of fallen trees, broken buildings and heaps of torn creepers, and on the pile of ruins sat a brown monkey of gigantic proportions showing his teeth to anyone who dared to approach him. The Rakshasi women who kept watch on the princess now awoke from their sleep and witnessing the scene asked Sita whether she knew anything about him.

"What do I know of your Rakshasa magic?" she replied. "You Rakshasas assume what forms you like. It is only serpents that can know serpents' ways. So don't ask me anything about it."

Meanwhile the report that a gigantic monkey had got into the Asoka grove and was despoiling it spread like wild fire all over the royal enclosure as people were getting out of their beds early in the morning. Some of the guards ran to the palace and reported to Ravana that most of the trees near the White Palace had been uprooted by the monkey, but that the tree under which the princess sat was untouched. Ravana laughed and, ordered a small regiment of soldiers to go and scare away the animal. The soldiers marched with their bows and arrows, their iron clubs and maces, and surrounded Hanuman on all sides. The hero now assumed still more gigantic proportions and roared so loud that all Lanka heard him and the birds flying

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in the grove fell down dead. "Victory to Rama and Lakshmana! Victory to Sugriva, the King of the Vanaras!"—that was the battle cry of Hanuman as he seized a huge iron beam near the northern gate and pounced on the attacking regiment and killed every one of the soldiers. After this victory he flew to the steeple of the White Palace and wrenched one of its pillars adorned with gold and whirled it so fast that it caught fire. He threw this band of fire in the centre of the building. It caught some inflammable material there and soon there were raging flames of fire all over the building. And in the red glare that overspread the sky Hanuman was seen flying hither and thither frightening the assembled crowd below and saying, "This is nothing compared to what you are going to get, you Rakshasas. There are hundreds of thousands of Vanaras like me in Sugriva's army. And they are all coming to destory this city ruled by Ravana. We are all servants of Rama, the champion of Dharma, whose anger you have provoked."

When Ravana heard of the destruction of the soldiers he had sent, he was angry that they were such a cowardly lot and ordered one of his army chiefs,—Jambumali, the son of Prahasta, to go to the spot at once and check the ravages of the monkey.

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Jambumali was glad that he had thus an opportunity for distinguishing himself and marched to the grove in his chariot drawn by mules. He discharged a sheaf of arrows and hit Hanuman on his face and shoulders. The wounded Hanuman jumped down from the roof of the porch where he was sitting, heaved up a big stone lying on the ground and threw it on the enemy. Jambumali avoided the blow by breaking the stone to pieces with his arrows half-way. Then Hanuman uprooted a sala tree in the grove and was about to hurl it against the Rakshasa, when the latter discharged a number of arrows and not only split the tree into several wands but also hit the aggressor in his shoulders and chest. The Vanara was now enraged and, taking up a heavy iron club, whirled it round and round and gave the Rakshasa such a violent blow that he and his chariot and the mules were laid flat on the ground.

Jambumali's death was at once reported to the king, who jumped up from his seat in anger and ordered seven officers of his army of the rank of ministers' sons to march against the formidable enemy and kill him on the spot. These young officers marched in their gilded chariots drawn by noble steeds, each anxious to outstrip the others. As soon as they sighted the enemy, they began to

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discharge arrows from their golden bows, so that Hanuman was soon enveloped in a cloud of arrows like a mountain peak during the rains. But in a moment he scattered the cloud with his hands and jumped on the advancing line of chariots and struck down the young warriors, some with his palms, some with his fists and some with his feet. When the seven officers thus fell, never to rise again, their companions ran away in all directions.

When Ravana heard of this, he was so angry that he could not speak. His blood-shot eyes turned to one of his sons, Prince Aksha, who was always eager for battle. The prince understood his father's intention and started at once in his mighty chariot. He went straight against the enemy with marvellous speed, and before the latter knew that a chariot had arrived he was hit by three sharp arrows on his forehead and began to bleed profusely. Hanuman yelled with pain and flew up into the air whirling his hands furiously. But, to his great surprise, the Rakshasa prince also flew up, chariot and all, discharging showers of arrows and giving him no rest whatever. However, Hanuman did not lose his presence of mind. He said to himself, "This young fellow is doing very good work. He has a bright morning face and his valour and skill are far beyond his years. What a

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pity I have to cut short his career! But if I don't do it now, he might become in course of time too irresistible even for the gods. A small fire must be put out before it becomes a conflagration."

Having thus made up his mind, Hanuman flew straight at the Rakshasa prince and felled with one blow of his hand his chariot and horses. Aksha now kicked off his broken chariot and stood in the air facing his enemy with his bow in hand. Hanuman saw his opportunity at once and suddenly descending a little caught hold of the young Rakshasa's legs and whirling him in the air, as a vulture does a serpent, dashed his head on the ground again and again till he became a mere ball of flesh. Having accomplished the feat, he returned to his perch at the gate from where he carried on his operations.

When Ravana heard of the death of the young prince, he was beside himself with sorrow and anger. He restrained himself, however and sent for Indrajit, the crown prince, his first-born, and said to him, "You know all the missiles of war, O invincible Indrajit. Even the gods tremble at the mention of your name. Next to me, there is no one who can inspire confidence in the army as successfully as you can. Go now and avenge the death of your brother. I am ashamed that so much

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destruction has been wrought to-day in our forces by an ape."

Indrajit bowed and left the presence of his father. He marched to the grove in a chariot drawn by four mighty elephants and made such a noise testing his bow that it was like thunder. Hanuman, on seeing him, flew up at once into the sky followed by the deadly shafts of his enemy. But he dodged them all by his swift movements. This intense game of hide-and-seek went on for a long time, the arrows of Indrajit seeking him out, wherever he hid himself among the clouds. The Rakshasa prince concluded that his enemy had perhaps got a boon from the gods that he could not be killed in the ordinary way and thought of capturing him alive as a prisoner. So he discharged against him the potent missile of Brahma and watched the effect. He had soon the satisfaction of seeing Hanuman drop like a plummet on the ground unable to move his hands and legs. As soon as they saw their hateful enemy fall to the ground, the Rakshasa soldiers ran to him and bound him hand and foot with ropes, scarves and chains, so that he might not rise again. They did not know that the Brahma missile would lose its binding force when once bonds of earthly material intervened. Indrajit knew it, but the thing had

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been done before he came down to see his prisoner. Hanuman also knew it, and, if he had wished, he could have broken himself loose from the ropes and, chains that bound his limbs. But he submitted himself to be led a prisoner into the presence of Ravana, so that he might have an idea of the Rakshasa court and the opinions that prevailed there.

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CHAPTER XXIX

WHEN Hanuman was led in chains to the hall, where Ravana sat on a throne amidst his counsellors, there were audible whispers on every side as to who the Vanara was, who had sent him and with what object. And the mob which followed him and was outside the hall raised the cries of "Kill him," "Burn him alive," "Cut him to pieces." Hanuman quietly surveyed the scene. He had seen Ravana before. He had seen him bare-bodied sleeping on his bed, he had seen him in the Asoka grove later surrounded by the fair women of his harem and threatening Sita with dire consequences, and now he saw him on his throne in all his regal pomp and glory with hundreds of princes and courtiers on lesser thrones around him. He was struck with the splendour and brilliance of that majestic figure and said to himself, "Oh! What a resplendent form! What majesty! What strength! What puissant will! No wonder even the gods and demigods are afraid of him. If only he should use his greatness on the side of Dharma, instead of Adharma, he would be the King of the gods instead of the King of the Rakshasas. Ravana is, I see, little less than Rama in power. But, while the Prince of Ayodhya uses his power for good, the King of Lanka uses it for evil."

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Ravana too was, on his side, impressed with the appearance of Hanuman. He instinctively recognised in that sub-human form a mighty personality with superhuman powers. But when he remembered the havoc he had caused, and especially the death of his son Aksha, he became blind with anger and commanded one of his ministers to question him and find out who he was.

"Who are you, O Vanara?" asked the minister Prahasta. "Who has sent you here? Are you the spy of Kubera or Varuna or Yama? You have the form of a monkey, but you don't seem to be really one. Why have you committed all this havoc in the Asoka grove? Tell us your story truthfully. Then you may have a chance of going away from here alive. But if you lie, you will lose your life."

"I am not a spy of either Kubera or Yama or Varuna, O King of the Rakshasas," said Hanuman directly addressing Ravana. "I have not assumed the form of a Vanara. I am a Vanara. I wanted to have an interview with you, O King. That is why I uprooted a few trees and created a disturbance in the grove. All that followed was done in pure self-defence. I have voluntarily submitted to these bonds that you see on my person, so that I may have an opportunity of being led into your

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presence and speaking to you. Now that I am here let me tell you that I have come to Lanka on an important matter of the State. I am the messenger of Sri Ramachandra, the Prince of Ayodhya. I am one of those Vanaras who have been commanded to find out where the Princess, his consort, who has been abducted by you lies hidden. I have found her now in your Asoka grove strictly guarded by a band of Rakshasis. I will go back now and give the Prince this information. What he will do next, it is not for me to say and I have not the liberty to say. But I may express my own opinion on what you have done. You are a great king. You have acquired wonderful powers by long *tapas*. And you have a knowledge of Dharma. Great kings like you should never do things which are contrary to Dharma and which are disastrous in their consequences not only to themselves but also to their subjects. Your abduction of the Princess of Ayodhya is a grossly sinful act. Your imprisoning her in your kingdom is like a man imprisoning fire in the clothes he is wearing. She will burn you, scorch you and reduce you and your kingdom to ashes. Beware! Your destruction is only a question of time. You do not know the power of her virtue. What I have done to-day is only a sign of the coming wrath. This city is doomed. I am the

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messenger of Rama. I know him well. You do not know him. None who has done any injury to him or to his friends can live. You know how your brothers, Khara and Dooshana, and all their armies were routed by him single-handed. You are not unaware of the strength of Vali, who persecuted Sugriva, his brother, unjustly. A single arrow from the Prince's bow carried him off to the other world. So I say to you, O King of the Rakshasas, beware! You and your kingdom are in imminent danger of being destroyed on account of your crime."

Ravana was wild with rage when he heard these words and ordered that Hanuman should be put to death at once. But scarcely was the command given when Vibhishana, his brother, rose to his feet, and said, "Excuse me, O King of the Rakshasas. Give up your anger and listen to me. It is not right to put an envoy to death. It is against law and precedent."

"He is an offender," replied Ravana, "his offence has been great and he deserves death."

"His offence has been great, no doubt," rejoined Vibhishana, "but he is also an envoy, and the killing of an envoy is prohibited in all codes of law. Other kinds of punishments are prescribed for envoys who give offence, such as

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whipping, branding or maiming, anything short of death. Let us be just and not give way to anger. The brave can afford to be just. It is the weak that give way to anger. Moreover, it is unwise to kill this envoy. You are eager for war in which you can distinguish yourself. If you allow him to go back you will have war very soon. But if you kill him now, it will be postponed. Also, your killing him would be interpreted as meaning that, like a coward, you wanted to avoid war—which is not a fact. One word more. An envoy is not an independent person. He is only the mouthpiece of his master. Your anger should be directed against the master, not against the servant."

"You have spoken well, my brother," cried Ravana. "We will mutilate this fellow and not kill him. He says he is a real monkey. And the most distinguishing part of a monkey is his tail. So let us cut off his tail and let him go. He has prated of our kingdom being reduced to ashes. Let his tail be reduced to ashes for his insolent speech."

He then ordered his servants to set fire to the Vanara's tail and take him round the streets of Lanka in chains and proclaim him a spy. Hanuman received the decision in silence.

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He was glad that an opportunity was thus given to him to see the entire city and note its fortifications, its arsenals and its points of strength and weakness. He had seen the city only during the night and in a very stealthy manner. Now he would see it during the day and note where the city was open to attack and where its walls could be breached.

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CHAPTER XXX

ACCORDINGLY Hanuman submitted without a word when the Rakshasas led him out of the hall, twisted all sorts of old clothes round his tail, soaked them in oil and set fire to them. They then took him round the city beating drums and sounding bugles and proclaiming him a spy in all important places. A huge mob followed this procession, jeering and taunting and dancing with joy. Men, women and children, all came out to see the fun. Never was there such a hilarious crowd before in the streets of Lanka.

"A unique torch-bearer," they cried, "the torch and the bearer are one."

As the procession marched through the streets, almost every house contributed its quota of oil or old clothes "to keep the torch burning," as they said. But when the princess in the Asoka grove heard of this, she sat down in intense prayer to the god of fire that he might not hurt the prince's messenger. "If I have any virtue in me, O god of fire," she prayed, "if my love towards my husband is genuine, if my faith is pure and spotless and if there is any good in store for me, hurt not the messenger, I pray. May he feel no heat whatsoever!"

The prayer of a pure heart can never go in vain. Hanuman did not feel the heat at all, though

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a part of his body was blazing like a torch. He wondered why it was so. But a moment's thought convinced him that all the elements as well as all creatures were helpful to the prince's cause. The prince was Dharma incarnate, and all things in the world are designed to promote the cause of Dharma. Hanuman was humble enough to think that it was because he was the messenger of the prince that he remained unhurt and not because he possessed any merit of his own. When he had seen all that could be seen in Lanka he thought within himself, "Now I will teach these Rakshasas a lesson which they will never forget."

He then suddenly made his body shrink so that the chains and ropes that bound him became loose and dropped on the ground. And, before his captors recovered from their surprise, he escaped from their hands and got upon the roof of the house which had just supplied oil to his flaming torch. He set fire to the roof and ran on the tops of all houses in the street from one end to another. All of them caught fire and began to burn and their inmates rushed out with their children making hideous cries. Hanuman now crossed over to the next street and similarly ran over the roofs of the houses and set fire to all of them. There was wild confusion and people ran helter-skelter to avoid the

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flams and the falling roofs. Some brought ladders and tried to save the people caught up in the flames on the upper storeys, some drew buckets of water from the wells and tried to quench the spreading fire, some tried to rescue their valuables and some ran about giving warning to other people and some pursued Hanuman flinging at him stones, sticks, knives, vessels, in fact, anything they could lay their hands on. But he avoided all these missiles by his quick movements. He often surprised his assailants by leaping over many streets and setting fire to buildings in an unsuspected quarter far away. And after creating enough confusion there by running over the roofs, he would jump up again and alight in another distant part of the city and start operations there. In this way, the whole city was in flames in a very short time and the shrieks of women and children rent the air. Palatial mansions which had looked so beautiful in the moonlight only the night before became charred ruins by midday and thousands of the Rakshasas who had been merrily drinking in their houses yesterday, when Hanuman noiselessly crept along the beams or rafters, were rendered homeless to-day. The quickness with which the various parts of the city caught fire prevented the rescue parties from doing anything effective. In some places the Rakshasas were taken

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so completely by surprise that they became dazed and looked on helplessly without throwing even a bucket of water on the flames. When Hanuman was satisfied that all the quarters of the city, especially the royal enclosure containing many palaces, had had their share of the raging fire, he ran to the margin of the sea and quenched his flaming torch in the waters.

Then suddenly with a pang came the thought that the princess also might have perished in the flames. He bitterly cursed himself for having been so unmindful of her safety. He had been foolishly carried away by his love of revenge and his delight in the destruction of the enemy. If that calamity had happened, what reply could he give to the questions of Angada, Sugriva and Rama on his return? It would be far better for him to perish along with her in these flames which he himself had caused. With these bitter thoughts stinging his mind like scorpions, he warily went back to the Asoka grove and was relieved to see from a distance the great tree under which Sita sat standing intact. He thereupon paused and took breath and said to himself, "I should have known better before giving way to these tormenting thoughts. How could one fire consume another? The Princess is all a spiritual fire and how could she be affected by this material

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fire? This material fire could not touch even my own body on account of her grace and the grace of her lord. How could it touch her? The purity of her heart can reduce anything to ashes, it can overcome even this flaming Lanka."

Then he once more approached the princess to take leave of her. She looked at him with great admiration and said, "My son, you have justified my confidence in your powers. I am sure that, single-handed, you can conquer all these Rakshasas and take me to my lord. But I want that he should come and rescue me himself and take me back in triumph. And I rely entirely on you for bringing him here as soon as possible."

"Rest assured, my mother," said Hanuman, "that the Prince will be here in a very short time with all the Vanara and Riksha hosts. And nothing can stand against him."

He once more prostrated himself before her and took leave of her. He then flew to one of the peaks, called Arishta, in the mountain range and from there began his homeward flight. He crossed the sea flying in the air as before. But this time he had no obstructions of any kind. As soon as he sighted the Mahendra mountain on which his companions were waiting for him, he gave them a signal of his return by roaring as loud as he could.

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When they heard the roar, they at once recognised his voice and were anxious to know what news he brought.

"It is glad news he is bringing, O Vanaras, I am sure," said the old Jambavan, "else he would not roar so joyfully."

The Vanaras thereupon danced with joy. Some of them ran to the hill tops, some ascended trees and some got up to the highest boulders lying near them and stood on tiptoe. And all of them roared in response and waved branches of trees or little twigs or scarves or their own bare arms in welcome to the returning hero. At last, when he came near and alighted on the mountain, they all stood for a moment with folded hands in reverent salutation. And then some of them ran to the caves and brought furits, nuts and honey and placed them before him, so that he might refresh himself after his long journey. As soon as he alighted, Hanuman went first to Jambavan, the oldest member of their company, and touched his feet. Then he turned to Angada, the leader, and paid his respects to him. They were all anxious to know what words he would utter when he opened his lips. He saw their anxiety and said at once, "Seen Sita." The Vanaras now burst into a loud applause. Some roared, some shouted, some

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ran hither and thither, some danced around him, and some touched his body and kissed their hands. After the excitement was over, they sat round Hanuman, and the old Jambavan asked him to give them an account of his adventure in detail. Hanuman thereupon bowed his head in the direction of the princess in Lanka and gave a long and detailed description of his flight across the ocean and of his doings in Lanka and the conversations he had had with the princess.

"I am unable to take away my mind, O Vanaras," concluded Hanuman, "from the Princess and her exalted character. It is indeed her character that will crown the efforts of Rama and Sugriva with success."

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CHAPTER XXXI

WHEN Hanuman concluded his narrative they began to discuss what they should do next. Jambavan pointed out that their first duty was to go back to Kishkindha and report on the success of their mission. Accordingly they started in great glee and flew over the intervening mountains, forests and territories and reached the 'Honey Grove' on the outskirts of Kishkindha. Here they made themselves merry by drinking the stored-up honey, by uprooting trees and by playing many practical jokes upon one another. The Honey Grove belonged to Sugriva and was kept under strict guard, so that none had dared to enter it before without permission. But now Angada's band not only entered it without permission but also appropriated the stores freely, and when the guards protested, they were soundly beaten by the intoxicated Vanaras. The Grove was under the supervision of Dadhimukha, Sugriva's own maternal uncle. When he came out to remonstrate, he was also roughly handled by the revellers. He was infuriated and went to complain against them in person to Sugriva. When Sugriva heard him, he understood that Angada and his companions must have succeeded in their mission. Else they would not have dared to behave in that

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unruly fashion. So he pacified Dadhimukha and instructed him to go back and ask the revellers to report themselves to the king at once. When Dadhimukha departed, Sugriva told Rama and Lakshmana to be prepared for the good news that Angada's band was sure to give them.

The Vanaras soon came into the presence of Sugriva, Rama and Lakshmana and reported how Hanuman had succeeded in crossing over to Lanka, and how he had seen the princess and come back safe. Hanuman was then asked to give a detailed account of Lanka and the state of the princess there. He thereupon repeated what he had already narrated to his companions on the Mahendra mountain and placed in the hands of Rama the crest-jewel which Sita had given as a token of recognition. The prince burst into tears when he saw the jewel and, pressing it lovingly against his heart, said to Sugriva, "This jewel was given to the Princess by her father at the time of our marriage. I used to see it always shining through her hair. Now I see it alone. However, I feel, when I see it, as if she were here. O Hanuman, my beloved friend, come and tell me once more what my beloved has told you. Kindly give me her exact words. They are like a tonic to my sick heart."

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Hanuman repeated once more the conversation between him and the princess and said, "I forgot to tell you, O Prince, about another token she gave me. She asked me to remind you of the incident of the crow at Chitrakuta and said that, having severely punished a small offender like the crow, you should not neglect the great offender Ravana. I thereupon assured her that Ravana was not going to be neglected and that, as soon as I gave you the information about Lanka, you would go there with all the Vanara hosts and destroy the city and take her back in triumph. She was pleased to hear my assurance and told me several times that she could not hold on for more than a month and that, if the Prince arrived after a month, he would be arriving too late."

"Well done, my friend," cried the prince, "How can I requite you for all the trouble you have taken? I am an exile and can give you nothing. But I must show my love and esteem for you." So saying he arose and, to the no small embarrassment of Hanuman, embraced him most affectionately and said, "I cannot at present show my gratitude to you in any other way."

Then he turned to Sugriva and began to discuss with him the ways and means of reaching

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Lanka as soon as possible. There was first the problem of the sea. How were they going to cross it? Sugriva suggested that a causeway might be built and his troops taken along the way to Lanka. The prince's heart sank within him when he thought of the stupendous work involved in building a causeway one hundred yojanas long. But Sugriva cheered him up and said that everything was possible for his brave Vanara hosts. He had in his army heroes who could even lift up the entire island of the Rakshasas and bring it to him. If the building of a causeway was too difficult an undertaking they would devise some other means of reaching Lanka. Thus encouraged by Sugriva, Rama took heart and began to enquire of Hanuman details about the defences of Lanka, its fortresses and armouries, and the strong and weak points of Ravana's capital. And Hanuman gave a detailed account of Lanka and said that it was quite possible for the Vanara army to attack the abode of the Rakshasas and destroy it completely.

"Then let us march at once," cried Rama. "Give orders, O Sugriva, for the armies to start even now. Let Nila take the lead and go in advance and see what dangers lurk on the way. And let the entire army follow him, guarded

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on the right by Rishabha and on the left by Gandhamadana, and let Jambavan, Sushena and Dirghadarsi bring up the rear."

Sugriva gladly passed the necessary orders. The march then began.

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PART III

CHAPTER XXXII

WHEN Sugriva gave the orders for the march, the Vanara hosts leapt with joy and each Vanara chief boasted of his prowess and spoke of the terrible things he would do to crush the Rakshasas on the battlefield. Their enthusiasm was boundless, and it was with the greatest difficulty that the commanders could restrain their regiments and make them observe the strict instructions of Rama that no villages or towns should be disturbed on the way, that no orchards should be plundered, no crops destroyed and no property looted. The clouds of dust which arose as the vast army marched south along a zigzag route, avoiding big towns and cities, resembled the onset of the monsoon, and people looked on the hosts with awe and wonder. The army passed from the Sahya to the Malaya and from the Malaya to the Mahendra skirting many a village and hamlet, crossing many a stream and making their way through many a forest and jungle. At last, they reached the margin of the Indian Ocean and

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pitched their camps on the sands of the beach. The army was an ocean by itself and the noise of its movements drowned the noise of the billow of the sea. It was divided into three sections and placed under suitable commands. Nila was the generalissimo, and Mainda and Dvivida were his deputies, moving from camp to camp and enquiring if all was well. Now that the entire army was in sight of the dark blue ocean, whose billows extended as far as the eye could see, their fears about crossing it re-entered their minds, and the leaders assembled and began to discuss the question.

Meanwhile the King of Lanka learnt through his spies that a vast army of the Vanaras lay encamped on the other side of the sea and was planning to cross it. He brought it to the notice of his ministers and sought their advice. They praised Ravana to the skies, declared he was unconquerable, prided themselves on their own valour and the strength of their armies and begged their king to treat with contempt the Vanara hosts assembled under Rama's banner. But Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, disagreed with them, and said they had underestimated the Prince of Ayodhya. He reminded them of the rout of Khara and Dooshana, who were unable with all their army of fourteen thousand men to stand against Rama, and

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of the vast destruction caused in Lanka by Hanuman, a single follower of his. He further pointed out that their cause was unjust and unholy. The abduction of the princess was a sin which was bound to bring destruction in its train. Therefore he would advise the king, his brother, to retrace his steps, give back the princess and make peace with the prince before he came to Lanka with his avenging armies and laid waste the city. According to him that was the only safe course for the King of the Rakshasas. Ravana listened patiently to the passionate appeal of his brother and, without saying a word, abruptly dismissed his counsellors and went home.

The next morning Vibhishana went to Ravana's palace, met his brother in private and repeated his advice.

"Don't you see, my brother," said he, "how since you brought this Princess to Lanka inauspicious omens of different kinds are making their appearance here as a warning to us? The fires on our altars are not burning bright, our oblations to the gods are eaten up by ants, our cows have gone dry, our elephants and horses are shedding tears and refusing to feed and the cries of ravens and kites are ever in our ears. The wise among us say that these presage a great disaster in store for

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us. Many of our ladies are in tears, but they are afraid of speaking their minds to you. Forgive my boldness. I am speaking for the good of Lanka. It is not good for us to keep Sita here in captivity. Surrender her to her husband and let this city of ours return to its normal condition."

Ravana grew restless and impatient as he listened to Vibhishana. As soon as the latter had finished, he burst out in anger, "I see no cause for fear anywhere. Rama can never get back Sita. That is certain. Let him come here even with the king of the gods as his ally. He cannot stand before me." So saying he rose and dismissed his brother unceremoniously.

A day passed. Ravana wanted to strengthen himself in his opinion. So he called a council of war. Invitations were sent to all the chief citizens in Lanka, and they came in large numbers. Elaborate precautions were taken. Troops were stationed both inside and outside the assembly hall to preserve order. There was a huge concourse of people on all sides of the building to know what momentous decision would be taken by the King in consultation with his councillors. Ravana sat on his high throne of gold and diamonds and all the Rakshasa chiefs were assigned seats according to their rank. Some sat on lesser thrones, some on

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platforms covered with mats of kusa grass and some on the ground. When all had taken their seats and there was a hush of silence throughout that vast assembly, Ravana began to address them:—

"Able counsellors of mine, in all affairs of the State, whenever I found it difficult to decide which course was profitable and which was not, which line of action was advantageous and which was not and which policy was right and which was not, I have sought your advice and always found it wise, beneficial and fruitful. You all know—except, of course, my brother Kumbhakarna, who sleeps for six months at a stretch, but who is happily awake to-day and now here with us—how we came into conflict with the Prince of Ayodhya, how from our own territory in the forest of Dandaka I have carried off as a fair prize the Princess who was wandering there along with her husband. It is admitted on all hands that, in the three worlds, there is no woman who is equal to her in beauty. She has captivated my heart and I expect her to be altogether my own in a short time. She has asked for an interval of one year before she would yield to my wishes. Now I hear that Rama, her husband, and Lakshmana, his brother, are on their way to Lanka with a large Vanara army headed by Sugriva and are at present encamped on the other

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side of the northern sea. It is, of course, impossible for a large army to cross one hundred yojanas of the dark ocean and come to Lanka. But for argument's sake let us suppose they succeed in coming, what shall we do? It is for you to decide. You all know the havoc wrought only a short time ago by that mischievous monkey who called himself a follower of Rama. We have now to think and make preparations on the supposition—it may be a wild one—that all the Vanaras in Rama's army are as formidable as the one who visited us recently and that the entire army will find some superhuman means of crossing the ocean and coming to Lanka. It is, of course, now a point of honour with us not to yield Sita. How best we can, without yielding our fair prize, vanquish the foe who has intruded into our territory, killed two of my brothers and mutilated my sister—it is for you now to decide, O Rakshasa chiefs. It is with your help that I gained all my victories, especially my victory over the gods which has made Lanka so famous. And all the chiefs who participated in that glorious fight are now here in this hall. It is for them to decide what we have to do to secure a similar victory now."

Ravana paused and looked round for applause from his loyal henchmen. But hardly had he

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finished speaking before his brother Kumbhakarna, of gigantic proportions rose like a mountain among molehills and thundered, "Too late in the day, my brother, you come to seek our advice. You would have acted wisely if you had sought before the advice you now seek. You brought Sita here. It is surely not wisdom to do a thing and then think of its consequences. The wise think of the consequence of their actions before they act. Most thoughtlessly have you embarked on an action which is bound to have very dangerous consequences. I may say you have drunk poison, and yet by some good fortune you are still alive. But have no fear. I will fight your enemies. I can vanquish even the king of the gods on the battle-field. What are these men, Rama and Lakshmana, before me? While they are still fumbling at their bows and arrows, I will pounce on them, kill them and drink their blood. So I say, have no fears. Leave your foes to me. And after I have killed Rama, you can make Sita your own."

When Kumbhakarna ceased, Mahaparsva rose to pacify Ravana, who had not liked the opening remarks of his brother. He was a vulgar brute and brutal was the advice he gave to his master. He compared Ravana to a man who goes in quest of wild honey, risks his life in a forest full of serpents

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and wild animals and brings the honey home, but refrains from tasting it. For tasting honey one need not ask leave of the honey. And if the bees should prusue Ravana to Lanka and try to sting him, Kumbhakarna and Indrajit alone without any other help could crush them to death. Ravana was pleased with the speech, but shook his head.

Then rose Vibhishana. He knew his would be a lone voice in that assembly, but he was determined to do his duty to the last. "It is not wild honey," he cried, "that Ravana has brought home to Lanka from the forests of Dhandaka, but an angry serpent that will destroy all of us. You are all prating here of your own evil deeds because you do not know the prowess of Rama and Lakshmana. I tell you, O King, that neither Kumbhakarna nor Indrajit, neither Mahaparsva nor Mahodara, neither Kumbha nor Nikumbha, nor even the king of the gods can ever protect you against the arrows of Rama. You may fly into heaven, you may hide yourself in the bowels of the earth, but you cannot escape from the missiles of Rama. So I repeat my advice that, if you want to save yourself from destruction, you should surrender the Princess and make peace with her husband. Do not give ear to the flatteries of your followers here. They are your enemies, not your friends. For they are advising

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you to adopt a line of action which will lead you and your people to utter ruin."

"What a coward you are, uncle!" hastily interrupted Indrajit, the eldest son of Ravana. "You are an exception in our family, for no one else who is descended from Pulastya would utter such craven words as you have done now. Look here. I am young and yet I have vanquished the gods in heaven and overthrown their king. When the great Airavata, Indra's elephant, came roaring against me, I threw the animal down and pulled out its ivory tusk, and with that I afterwards chased the gods. Have you forgotten my name—Indrajit, the Conqueror of Indra? It is a name, at the mere mention of which the high gods quake in fear to this day. And do you mean to say that these ordinary human creatures—Rama and Lakshmana —can stand against me? I tell you they will not be able to stand against even the meanest of the Rakshasas here."

"Yes, you are young, my boy," rebuked Vibhishana, "your mind is immature and your words are most foolish. You prate of things of which you know very little. You are ill-disciplined and you boast always of your deeds of violence. You have not the understanding to grasp the danger which is about to overtake your father. By your

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wild bragging you are only contributing to his utter ruin. Who is that fool that has brought you into this company of elders where you have no place? He is to be punished, not you."

Then turning to Ravana, he said, "I repeat my advice to you, O King of the Rakshasas. If you want to live in peace and happiness, send the Princess back to Rama with as many valuable gifts as you can think of by way of reparation."

On hearing these words, Ravana, lost all patience and in a voice tremulous with emotion cried, "I prefer a direct enemy to a traitor in the garb of a friend. All the world over, the nearest kinsmen are the greatest enemies. They cannot bear to see one of their kinsfolk rise to a position of eminence. They are jealous and ungrateful. They plot and intrigue against him in secret while accepting favours from him and affecting to be on friendly terms with him in public. We are told that wild elephants are not afraid so much of the hunters, or the nets they spread, or the fires they cause in the forest, as of the tame elephants they set against them. They are afraid of their own kindred who are in league with the enemy. The fact is, O Vibhishana, you are jealous of my power and of my unrivalled sovereignty, and you want that I should be humiliated. You are as grateful to

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me as the bee is to the flower whose honey it has sucked. If another person had uttered the words that you have uttered to-day, he would have lost his life. But, as you are my brother, I forgive you. You are a disgrace to the family. Get out of my sight. You have no place in this assembly."

Quaking with anger at these unjust accusations, Vibhishana rose to his feet, and along with him rose four of his followers. They left the assembly, shook the dust of Lanka off their feet and directly rose into the sky like columns of smoke. Vibhishana was still livid with anger when he addressed Ravana from the air and said:—

"Yes. We are brothers, O King of the Rakshasas. And you are the elder. You are at liberty to say what you like of me. But I should not answer you in the same language. However, I am bound to say that you have abandoned the path of Dharma, and have accused me most unjustly. I assure you, whatever I have said I have said only for your own good. I did not like to see you come to ruin and so I warned you. But who can save a doomed man? It is easy in this world to come across people who say what is agreeable to one, but very difficult to come across people who say what is disagreeable but beneficial to one. And even if there be any such, they are

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never listened to. It was my lot to tell you what was unpalatable to you. But, I repeat, it is for your own good that I said it. Never mind my words. But save yourself and save Lanka. I will vex you no longer with my presence. May you prosper! Farewell!"

With these words he and his followers flew away from Lanka and directly made for the camp of Rama on the other side of the sea.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

WHEN the Vanaras headed by Sugriva saw Vibhishana and his followers approaching the camp, they took them for the spies of Ravana and armed themselves with sticks and stones to attack them and kill them. Vibhishana surmised the situation, and, without descending to the ground, announced to them from the air that he was Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana, that he was banished from Lanka because he had urged his brother to give up Sita and make peace with Rama and that therefore he now came to the prince seeking his protection. He begged them to go and tell these facts to the prince and get his answer.

Sugriva himself carried the message to Rama and advised him not to trust the Rakshasa and give him an interview. And many of the Vanara chiefs agreed with him and said that Vibhishana should not be allowed to spy out the secrets of their camp. But the shrewd Hanuman differed from them. He had known Vibhishana's attitude during his visit to Lanka. In fact, he owed his life to Vibhishana's strong plea at Ravana's court that an envoy should not be put to death, even if he was guilty. Therefore he said that the very fact that Vibhishana fearlessly came straight to the prince's camp and clearly announced his intention.

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even before seeing him, showed that he was sincere. He was of the view that the prince might receive him. After they had stated their views, the prince clinched the argument with these words: "To him who seeks my protection saying, 'I am yours,' I offer security at once. That is a vow which I have taken and cannot depart from. Fetch him here—be it Vibhishana or Ravana himself. I grant him security. I am strong enough to defend myself against any harm he might do. Vibhishana is the brother of Ravana and, if he has really quarrelled with him and come to us, he will be of great use to us in this war. So have no fear, O Sugriva. Please go and bring him to me."

Sugriva went out and brought Vibhishana and his followers to Rama. The Rakshasas bowed to the prince and reverently touched his feet. And Vibhishana once more introduced himself saying, "I am Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana, O Prince. Having been insulted by him, I left Lanka with my followers and have sought your protection. My future is entirely in your hands and I am entirely at your service."

The prince graciously accepted his service and treated him with great respect. He then proceeded to enquire about the various Rakshasa chiefs whom he should hereafter encounter in battle, about

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their numbers, their rank and their might. Vibhishana gave a truthful account of all of them, beginning with Ravana and Kumbhakarna. He described their former adventures, their fights with the gods and their feats of strength. And then he gave an account of the millions of Rakshasas under arms, their stations, their equipment and their duties.

The prince calmly listened to him and said at the end, "I now understand, O Vibhishana, the might of Ravana, the King of the Rakshasas. But I tell you now—take it as a solemn oath—I am going to slay Ravana and all these Rakshasa chiefs you have described and make you the King of Lanka."

The whole assembly was startled to hear these words. They admired the calm strength and determination of the prince. Vibhishana now prostrated himself before Rama and said, "So far as it lies in my power, O Prince, I will contribute to your victory. I will join your army and fight on your side." Rama thereupon raised Vibhishana from the ground and warmly embraced him and said to Lakshmana who was by, "Fetch water from the sea, O Lakshmana, and duly sprinkle it on the head of Vibhishana and make him the King of the Rakshasas even now."

And this order was carried out amidst the acclamations of all in the camp.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

NOW that Vibhishaṇa was one of them, the Vanara chiefs began to take counsel with him about the difficult problem of crossing the sea. His advice was that the prince should reverently pray to the god of the sea and beg of him a safe passage for the army to Lanka. The prince consented to do so. He spread blades of kusa grass on the beach and lay prostrate on them, with his head towards the east, fasting and praying for three days and nights. But his prayers were not heard. So Rama was indignant. He rose, took his bow and began to discharge his fiery arrows against the sea, threatening to dry it up. And the creatures of the sea were terrified and millions of them rose above the surface of the water roaring in pain. A storm arose, the waters began to whirl and the waves receded ten miles from the shore. Still there was no response from the sea-god. Rama now took the deadly Brahmastra in hand and was about to cause a violent convulsion in Nature, when the god of the sea rose out of the waters, clad in robes of pearl and coral, crowned with flowering seaweeds and wearing, like garlands on his body, sea-snakes of different colours. With joined palms, the god moved across the waters like a stately ship to where the prince was standing and said:—

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"It is not in the power of the sea, O Righteous Prince, to give up its depth, any more than it is in the power of the fire to give up its heat. To be shallow is contrary to my Dharma, as to be cool is contrary to the Dharma of the god of fire. But I am willing to help you so far as it lies in my power. I will decree that no creature of mine, no whale or shark or crocodile, shall ever harm your army when it crosses the sea and I will also help you to build a bridge across."

"Good!" said the prince. "But what shall I do with this missile of Brahma, O god of the sea? I must discharge it somewhere. I can't put it back."

"You might point your missile to the north-western shore, O Prince", replied the god. "There lies a tract infested with pirates who are a disgrace to me. I abhor their deeds of violence. Let the whole tract, which now goes by the name of Drumakulya, be destroyed."

Before he granted the sea-god's request, Rama prayed inwardly that the tract might afterwards become a land of pasture for the cows of the neighbouring districts. That is how the pirate tract of Drumakulya became, in course of time, an extensive grazing ground under the name of Marukantara, famous for its luscious grass and sweet herbs.

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After Rama had discharged his missile in the direction which was suggested by the sea-god, he turned to him and asked him what suggestions he would make for the building of the bridge. The god said that one of Rama's own generals, Nala, could do all that was required. For he was the son of the famous Visvakarma, the architect of the gods, by a Vanara mother. He was equal to his father in constructive skill.

"So let Nala build the bridge for you," said the god of the sea, before he disappeared beneath the waters, "and I will bear it on my back. I will not let it sink."

Encouraged by the sea-god's assurance, the prince gave orders that a bridge should be built by the Vanaras under the direction of Nala. The entire host was now turned to this task. Hundreds of thousands of Vanaras went over the wooded hills of the Mahendra and brought down huge boulders and countless logs of wood and piled them all along the shore. They uprooted all kinds of trees, salas, dhavas, tilakas, asvakarnas, karnikaras, arjunas, bilvas, in fact, any tree that was big enough for their purpose—and dragged them to the seaside, branches and all. The jungle was also cleared of all its bamboos for several miles and the sea-coast of all its palms. But the work which the Vanaras

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enjoyed most was the rolling of the boulders down the hill slopes to the water's edge. They whistled, they sang, they danced, they laughed and abused one another, as they uprooted rocks and trees for several days and rolled or dragged them to the sea.

When the materials were all piled in heaps, which looked like hillocks along the shore as far as the eye could see, Nala began to build the causeway. Under his direction long measuring ropes were held by bands of Vanaras, while he went forward with skilled workmen holding long poles measuring the depth. These measurers and builders were preceded by companies who threw rocks and trees into the sea, thus providing footholds for those that followed.

It was a stupendous undertaking. But, as the entire host worked at it incessantly, the miracle was performed in five days. On the first day they did fourteen yojanas, on the second twenty, on the third twenty-one, on the fourth twenty-two and on the fifth twenty-three. Thus the entire causeway, when it was completed, was one hundred yojanas long and ten yojanas wide. The sea-god was as good as his word. The causeway held firm and all the Vanara hosts safely passed through it and reached Lanka.

When the hosts reassembled on the other side of the sea, the prince rearranged them into

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appropriate commands. Angada and Nila were stationed with their divisions in the middle. Behind them were stationed Jambavan, Sushena and Vegadarsi with their divisions. At the tail-end were stationed the reserves under the command of Sugriva. The right wing was occupied by Rishabha's forces and the left by Gandhamadana's. And at the head of the whole disposition were Rama and Lakshmana with their picked divisions.

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CHAPTER XXXV

RAVANA heard from his spies that the Vanara army had built a bridge and crossed the sea and was actually encamped on Lanka's soil. He wanted to know more about the army, its srtength, its equipment and its dispositions. So he instructed two of his ministers, Suka and Sarana, to go to the enemy's camp in disguise and collect all the necessary information. The ministers accordingly assumed the form of Vanaras, so as not to be recognised as Rakshasas, and went secretly to the Vanara camp and began to move about warily and take note of everything. They were astounded at the extent of the forces. They had never expected that the camp would be like a big city in which one lost one's way, unless one kept in mind some prominent landmarks. In their confusion they came up against Vibhishana, who at once detected them, in spite of their Vanara forms, and seized them and took them to the prince. They frankly confessed that they were spies sent by Ravana and threw themselves on the mercy of Rama, as they feared they would be summarily executed. The prince laughed and said they were quite at liberty to go and see any part of the camp they liked, that Vibhishana himself would conduct them to the various parts of it and that, after

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seeing everything they wanted to see, they might safely return to Ravana and submit their report. He then asked Vibhishana to set them at liberty. After they were set free, the prince asked them to carry a message from him to their king:

"Please tell the King of the Rakshasas after you return home what I now say, without omitting a single word:—

"Tomorrow morning will begin the destruction of Lanka. I will begin with the city walls and gates. So be prepared with your armies and their leaders and put forth all that strength relying on which you carried off the Princess of Ayodhya."

The Rakshasa spies applauded the righteousness of the prince and gladly returned to Lanka and told Ravana everything that had happened to them in the enemy's camp. They spoke with great admiration of the strength and the enthusiasm of the Vanara hosts and strongly pleaded for the restoration of the princess and the conclusion of peace. Ravana was angry and rebuked the ministers for their cowardice, saying that, if even all the gods and demigods in heaven and all the creatures on earth joined together and came up against him, he would fight them all fearlessly, but would never yield Sita. He then asked them to go with him to the top of the loftiest watch-tower in

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Lanka and point out to him the dispositions of the enemy's armies and describe the Vanara and other chiefs who were in charge of the various divisions. They obeyed the royal command, went up the tower with him, showed him the entire force of the prince spread out as on a map before them and discribed the several divisions, their numbers and their allotted tasks and the generals who commanded them. It was a long account they gave, and it took several hours for them to give him all the details they knew. At last, after pointing out Hanuman, whom Ravana could easily recognise as the Vanara who had set fire to Lanka, they said:—

"Beside him you see a noble hero of dark complexion with striking eyes. He is the Prince, of the Ikshvaku race, whose wife you seized at Janasthana and brought to Lanka. It is said that Dharma is rooted in him and that he is rooted in Dharma. Most learned of the learned is he, and yet he can wield the most deadly missiles. We are told he can split even the valut of heaven with his arrows and cleave the mountain rocks. He hopes to encounter you in battle. They say his fury is like the fury of Death, and his valour like the valour of Indra, the King of Heaven. On his right you see a young man of light complexion with dark

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curly hair. He has a broad chest and his eyes are red with anger. He is Lakshmana, the Prince's brother. They describe him as Rama's right hand or Rama's second self. He is ever impatient. But, he is wise in counsel and unconquerable in battle. He is ready at all times to lay down his life for his brother."

After describing some more of the army chiefs, Suka and Sarana warned Ravana against the might of the Vanara hosts commanded by Rama, whom they compared to a baleful comet risen over the Rakshasa kingdom. Thus in their honest admiration for the prince they so far forgot themselves that they incurred the wrath of Ravana, who impatiently heard and angrily dismissed them.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

BUT soon Ravana made a crafty and cruel use of all the knowledge he had now acquired of the enemy's forces. He sent for one of the most celebrated of the Rakshasa magicians, one Vidyujjihva by name, and asked him to produce by his black art a head which closely resembled that of Rama and to bring it with him to the Asoka grove. The magician obeyed and accompained Ravana. He was asked on reaching the grove to wait in an outhouse with the head and a long bow and a sword. Now Ravana went ahead to where the princess was sitting and announced to her in boastful speech that at last he had had his revenge for the death of his brothers, Khara and Dooshana, at Janasthana. The princess was startled and looked up. "I have slain the man who slew my brothers," continued Ravana, "I mean your husband, O Sita. The source of all your pride is dried up now. I need no longer beg you to become mine. You are mine now. Do you understand? Your husband has been killed. He is dead. And you know dead men do not come back to their wives. I see you are dazed and look listless. Listen to me. I will tell you what has happened."

The cruel Rakshasa then gave her the following fictitious account with all circumstantial

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details so as to carry conviction into the mind of Sita:—

"Your husband came with all the Vanara forces of the King of Kishkindha and encamped on the other side of the sea, with the idea of somehow crossing over to Lanka and offering battle to me. His army was footsore and tired after walking thousands of miles and was fast asleep. My spies had given us information about the movements of the enemy. So one of my generals, the redoubtable Prahasta, with a small but well-equipped company of soldiers, was lying in ambush on the other side. When he saw his opportunity, he marched at midnight with his picked force against the enemy's camp and fell on the sleeping generals and killed many of them. Prahasta himself with his own hand cut off your husband's head. Lakshmana escaped and ran away with some Vanaras. Hanuman's head has been broken. Sugriva lies with his throat cut. The old Jambavan has fallen, the twins, Mainda and Dvivida, have been both cut at the groin and have died in a pool of blood. Panasa has been mangled. Angada has been slain. And many of the sleeping Vanaras have been trampled to death. Some Vanaras tried to escape, but they have been chased, and brought down. Some, of course, have succeeded in escaping, but my soldiers are continuing to hunt

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them down. Meanwhile Prahasta has sent to me as a trophy your husband's head which he cut off."

Here Ravana paused and ordered one of the Rakshasi guards to go to the outhouse where the magician was waiting with the head and ask him to come. Vidyujjihva came and placed the head, the bow and the sword on the ground before Sita and stood with folded arms awaiting the king's command. The poor princess shrieked aloud on seeing the head which was exactly like her husband's, now covered with blood and dust, and fell down as if she were shot in the breast. And when she came to herself she wailed most piteously, covering the head with her arms, "Why am I alive, O gods, even after this? O my beloved lord, how short-lived you were! What has become of all the prophecies of those astrologers who said you would live very long and I should never lose you. It is my own sins that have brought about your death. O my lord, why have you left me here and gone to heaven? You promised at the time of our joining hands that you would take me always with you. Why have you broken the promise now? I have been hoping all these days that you would come here and rescue me. It is with that hope that I sustained my life in this hell. You have come and

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gone without taking me. O sir," she said turning to Ravana, "I pray, kill me also and lay my head on my lord's. Join the wife with the husband. The gods will bless you for that meritorious act. But you are cruel, you will never ease me of my pain."

While Sita was thus wailing and weeping so as to rend the hearts of even the Rakshasi women, the gate-keeper came hurriedly to Ravana with a message from the Commander-in-Chief of the Rakshasa army that his presence was urgently required at a meeting of the council of war. Ravana immediately left the place, accompanied by the magician and the servant. The princess still lay on the ground moaning half-unconsciously in her pain, now addressing her husband and now her tormentor, not knowing that the latter had left the place. Then Sarama, the wife of Vibhishana, who had always been friendly to the princess, came to her and rousing her from her torpor said, "I am Sarama, your friend. Open your eyes, O Sita, and look at me. Don't weep, my child. Your husband is alive and safe. You have been deceived by Rakshasa magic. It was a magic head that they brought to you. See, it vanished when the magician left the place. Do rise and sit up. I have brought you good news."

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The princess awoke as from an evil dream and saw that the head had in fact vanished along with Ravana and his attendant. And so she sat up to listen to what Sarama had to say. "Be of good cheer, my child," continued her friend, "the good news is, your husband, the Prince, has arrived with a large army. He has crossed the sea and is encamped on this island. All that long account of a night-attack which Ravana gave you is pure fiction invented by him to torture and subdue your spirit. The whole city is now preparing for war. That is why Ravana has now been hastily summoned from his wanton cruelty to you here."

"Listen," she said stopping for a few minutes, "even from here you can hear their preparations for war. I have come from the city and seen what they are doing. They are sounding the war-drum to rouse the martial spirit of the citizens. They are harnessing their war-horses and elephants. The cavalry men are cracking their whips. The infantry men are assembling everywhere in large numbers. The highways are thronged with troops splendidly arrayed. One sees on all sides the flash of swords, shields and armours, and of moving chariots and galloping horses. You can hear even from this distance the sound of the bells of marching elephants, the neighing of steeds and the

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rattle of rushing chariots. The tread of armed hosts makes one's hair stand on end. So weep no more, my child. Your husband is bound to win this war. His is a righteous cause. Ravana is sure to pay for his cruelty and sin. I hear that his own aged mother. his grandfather and an old retired minister and several others have advised him to restore you to your husband and avoid this war. But Ravana is stubborn. He pays no heed to counsels of peace and justice."

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CHAPTER XXXVII

AS the preparations for war were going on in Lanka, Vibhishana secretly sent his four followers into the city to find out the dispositions of the Rakshasa forces. They flew like birds and returned in a few hours and reported all they saw to their master. Vibhishana at once went to Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva and revealed to them the arrangements of the Rakshasas. He said:—"Prahasta with a large army is guarding the eastern gate of the city. The valiant Mahodara and Mahaparsva are guarding the southern gate. Indrajit, the son of Ravana, with a picked force armed with various weapons—swords, daggers, lances, maces and bows and arrows—is defending the western gate. Ravana himself, with thousands of veterans similarly armed, will be at the northern gate, as it is directly in front of us. Virupaksha, with a large army well-equipped, is guarding the centre. It is going to be a very tough fight, O Prince. Both sides are well balanced. I am not saying this to discourage you in any way, but to be forewarned and to make adequate arrangements to meet the enemy."

The prince calmly listened to Vibhishana and, as soon as he stopped, gave the necessary orders He asked the Vanara chief Nila with his army

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to give battle to Prahasta at the eastern gate, Angada, the son of Vali, to oppose Mahaparsva and Mahodara at the southern gate and the irresistible Hanuman to fight against Indrajit at the western gate and said that he himself and Lakshmana would attack Ravana, the enemy of the gods and men, at the northern gate. Finally he instructed the old veterans Jambavan and Vibhishana to be at the centre of the Vanara forces and Sugriva to be between the northern and the western gates.

After making these arrangments for the battle which was to begin on the morrow, the prince accompanied by his army chiefs went up the mountain of Suvela to have a view of the capital of Ravana, which was situated on the parallel height of Trikuta. He spent the night on the mountain, admiring the lofty towers, the beautiful palaces and the pleasure gardens of Lanka. He was told that the island, of which it was the capital, was a hundred yojanas long and thirty yojanas wide. He became sad when he thought of the impending destruction of that proud city and of the slaughter that it involved. "One doomed person sins, and millions pay for it with their lives," he said to his followers. "But it can't be helped. I must go on with my work."

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The next morning, when the various Vanara chiefs occupied the posts assigned to them and all the armies surrounded the city, the prince made one more effort to avoid the slaughter of war. He sent Angada to the king of the Rakshasas with the following message before the actual launching of the battle.

"I, the Prince of Ayodhya, am standing at the gates of Lanka with my armies to avenge the wrong you have done me. Your brother Vibhishana has taken refuge with me. Unless you restore to me at once the Princess whom you carried away and beg for my forgiveness, you and all your forces will be destroyed and Vibhishana will be made king in your stead. It is impossible for you to escape this impending destruction at my hands."

Angada fearlessly flew into the presence of Ravana and delivered the message. Ravana flared up in anger and ordered his armed attendants to seize the messenger and kill him. Four of them rushed on him and tried to pin his arms. When Angada had two of them well under each arm, he held them fast against his sides and flew up high into the air and let them go. They fell down and their heads were broken. Then Angada coming down broke to pieces one of the towers of Ravana's palace and safely returned to Rama and told him what had happened.

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CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE battle now began in earnest. The Vanaras and the Rakshasas were soon in a death-grapple. There were many hand to hand fights between the chiefs of the opposed armies. There were deafening cries of 'kill', 'tear', 'stop', 'let go' and 'don't run' on both sides. The Rakshasas fought with shining weapons of steel and iron, but the Vanaras were armed only with mountain crags and trunks of trees. There was immense slaughter on the first day. The sun went down on the battle-field strewn with broke chariots, dead horses, wounded elephants and splintered weapons as well as the dying soldiers of both armies. The fight continued even after nightfall and the confusion became worse. Angada distinguished himself by attacking Indrajit and killing his charioteer and horses. Indrajit thereupon abandoned his chariot, and, having recourse to his powers of magic, remained invisible. Rama knew he was a dangerous foe and asked ten of the Vanara chiefs to seek him out. But they were unable to discover where he was, though they felt his arrows piercing them all over their bodies. Indrajit laughed and cried, "When I choose to be invisible, even the king of the gods cannot find me out, O Rama and

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Lakshmana. How can you? Now see whether you can escape my arrows."

So saying he discharged a volley of arrows, which came hissing like serpents and bit the two princes all over their bodies. Rama and Lakshmana bled profusely, but maintained their ground for some time and vainly sought the source from which the arrows came. They fell down at last and lay motionless and unconscious on the ground, while their blood flowed in streams from their gaping wounds. Indrajit thought they were dead and shouted joyously to the Rakshasas, "My serpent missile has at last drunk the blood of those who slew my uncles at Janasthana. My father can sleep peacefully hereafter. Lanka has been rendered safe." He then fearlessly assailed the Vanara chiefs—Hanuman, Nila, Angada, Jambavan and others—with his sharp arrows, and, laughing in triumph, went home. He rushed into the presence of Ravana and said that Rama and Lakshmana had been killed by him. Ravana rose, warmly embraced his son and kissed him on the head. He then asked Indrajit to tell him all about it and was pleased beyond measure with the achievement of his son.

The Vanara chiefs were greatly relieved when, Indrajit left the battle-field. They surrounded the

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fallen princes and were sadly looking at their faces, when Rama first showed signs of returning consciousness. He gradually came to himself and seeing his brother lying motionless by his side thought he was dead and began to mourn for him, saying, "Of what use is life to me hereafter? My dearest brother, Lakshmana, is now no more. Searching in this world I might find a wife like Sita, but never a brother like Lakshmana, so attached to me and so valiant. If I should return to Ayodhya, and Sumitra and Kausalya ask me 'Where is Lakshmana? what answer shall I give them? Oh, it is far better for me to die here beside my dearest brother."

As the prince was thus wailing the loss of his brother, and all his friends, the Vanara chiefs, were shedding tears and looking on helplessly, a mighty wind arose and they heard the noise of rushing wings. They looked at the sky and saw the divine Garuda, who bears on his back the great God Vishnu, come down flapping his wings where Rama and Lakshmana lay wounded. He passed his hand over their bodies, and immediately their wounds were healed, their strength returned and Lakshmana rose refreshed as from a long sleep. Wondering at this transformation, Rama asked the celestial visitor who he was and how they had deserved his kindness.

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Garutman now announced himself and said, "I am the king of birds and at my sight all serpents slink away, and at my touch all poison is dissolved. None but me could have saved you from the effects of the deadly serpent missile which by his black art Indrajit had hurled against you. These Rakshasas are adepts in witchcraft, of which you know nothing. Your heart is pure, O Rama, and your cause is righteous and just. Therein lies your strength, not in witchcraft. The gods are bound to help those who are pure of heart and innocent of any guilt. My duty is done. Will you give me leave? We are ever friends, and of our friendship —more hereafter."

So saying Garutman flew away as he came, and the air was rent with the joyous cries and the tumultuous shouts of the Vanara army.

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CHAPTER XXXIX

WHEN the news was carried to Ravana that Rama and Lakshmana were free from the effects of Indrajit's serpent missile and were offering battle again with redoubled vigour, he bade Dhumraksha to take the field and march against the enemy. Dhumraksha rallied the Rakshasa forces and led the attack. He succeeded at first in making the Vanaras retire from their positions. But when Hanuman encountered him with a crag in his hand, he could not stand against him. He hurled his formidable mace on the head of the Vanara chief, but in vain, for he was himself crushed to death by the jagged stone flung at him. The Rakshasas retreated when their leader was slain.

Ravana then sent in succession three of his renowned chiefs, Vajradamshtra, Akampana and Prahasta. But after furious fighting all of them shared the fate of Dhumraksha. Vajradamshtra was killed by Angada, Akampana by Hanuman and Prahasta by Nila.

The death of Prahasta on the battle-field thoroughly startled Ravana. He never expected that what he regarded as the contemptible army of the Vanaras could cause the death of so many of the Rakshasa generals. So this time he took the field himself. He ascended a fiery chariot drawn

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by the best horses in Lanka and, accompained by a host of renowned warriors, proudly marched against the enemy. In that illustrious company surrounding him were such great heroes as Indrajit, Atikaya, Mahodara, Pisacha, Trisira, Kumbha, Nikumbha and Narantaka. Rama was astonished to see this galaxy of Rakshasa heroes and asked Vibhishana who they were. And Vibhishana rapidly surveyed the whole company and told him the name and the history of each of the heroes. When at last he pointed out Ravana, the King of the Rakshasas,Rama exclaimed,"Oh, how dazzling in splendour is Ravana! He is like the midday sun. No god or demigod, it seems to me, can equal him in effulgence. And how dazzling are the weapons in the hands of these Rakshasa chiefs! Fortunate am I to-day that I am encountering this host. I will now avenge the great wrong done to me."

While the prince was thus speaking to Vibhishana and while the Rakshasa chiefs, with their shining weapons, were spreading themselves over the whole field, Sugriva with a huge crag in his hand rushed against Ravana himself and hurled it at his head. But swift as thought Ravana raised his bow and broke the crag to pieces and shot such a sharp arrow against Sugriva that he fell down senseless. Seeing their king fall, a number of

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Vanara chiefs, Gavaya, Gavaksha, Rishabha, Nala and Jyotirmukha, rushed against the foe, each with a crag in his hand. But Ravana was equal to all of them. He broke to pieces their primitive weapons, and pinned every one of his assailants to the earth with his arrows. The rank and file of the Vanara army now fled in terror and sought shelter behind Rama. The prince was advancing in their defence, when Lakshmana came up to him and asked him permission to try his hand against the enemy. The permission was given and Lakshmana intervened between the chariot of Ravana and the fleeing Vanara soldiers pursued by his flaming darts. Hanuman saw the danger and leapt to Lakshmana's help. He boldly went near Ravana's chariot and said to him, "This hand of mine will now crush your life out of your vile body, O Rakshasa."

"Come on, you monkey," replied Ravana. "Strike me fearlessly and, before I kill you, acquire fame for having struck the King of the Rakshasas."

"Remember Aksha, your son," rejoined Hanuman, "whom I killed when I last visited Lanka."

Ravana was enraged when he was reminded of this loss and was the first to strike. Hanuman reeled under his blow. But, recovering in an instant, he paid the enemy in the same coin.

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"Well done," cried Ravana reeling in his turn. "I admire your strength, O Vanara."

"But what is the good of my strength," replied Hanuman, "when my blow has not succeeded in killing you? Come, receive one more blow from this hand and go to the abode of Death."

Ravana now leaned forward in his chariot and, before Hanuman could strike, dealt a stunning blow to the Vanara and stepped aside quickly to encounter Nila, who had now come up against him, with a crag in his hand. Nila could not stand long against Ravana, and so he contracted his body and flew up into the air and sat upon his flag. He then jumped from the flag on to Ravana's head and from the head back to the flag, eluding the enemy's arrows and causing him great annoyance. "Very nimble in your tricks are you, O monkey," said Ravana, "but see whether you can escape this missile of fire."

So saying he discharged a flaming arrow which brought down Nila unconscious to the earth. Ravana was now free to march against Lakshmana, who had been challenging him to a fight. He approached him and said, "Don't be in a hurry to embrace death, O Lakshmana. Now that you have come in the range of my sight, my arrows will send you soon to the abode of Yama."

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"You need not flatter yourself, O miscreant prince of sinners," cried Lakshmana in reply. "I know the extent of your valour. Cease boasting and fight, if you can."

Ravana replied, "Take it then", and discharged seven sharp arrows against him simultaneously. But Lakshmana broke them into splinters before they reached him. The Rakshasa then with redoubled vigour discharged against the prince volley upon volley of arrows of various shapes and sizes. But Lakshmana was more than a match for him and countered them all and took the offensive. He aimed at the bow in Ravana's hand and broke it into two. And, while the foe was taking another weapon, he pierced his body with three sharp arrows. Smarting with pain, Ravana now grasped a mighty missile, called Sakti, which Brahma had bestowed on him as a boon and hurled it with all his might against the prince. The latter tried to counter it with a cloud of arrows. But it was irresistible. It came like a thunderbolt and struck against Lakshmana's breast, and he fell down senseless. Ravana now jumped down from his chariot with the idea of seizing the unconscious prince and carrying him off as a prisoner. But to his surprise, he found he could not lift him from the ground. While he was struggling with the weight, Hanuman

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pounced on him and gave him such a blow with his fist that King of the Rakshasas spouted blood from his mouth, nose and ears. It was with the greatest difficulty that Ravana recovered from this shock and got back into his chariot.

Hanuman meanwhile carried off the unconscious Lakshmana to a place of safety and, after the prince had come to himself, he returned and found Rama was about to attack Ravana. He saw it would be an unequal fight if Rama stood on the ground while Ravana was seated in his chariot. So he asked the prince to mount on his back and fight his enemy. The prince consented, and they at once faced Ravana, who was on the point of withdrawing from the field.

"Stop, stop," cried the prince, "you can't escape from me to-day. Wherever you go, I will pursue you and run you down."

Ravana now turned fiercely against his enemies and vented his wrath first against Hanuman whose body he riddled with arrows, as he came near his chariot bearing the prince on his back. Meanwhile the prince took the opportunity and slew the horses that drew Ravana's chariot, struck down the charioteer and pierced Ravana's breast with a pointed shaft. Unable to bear the pain, the king of the Rakshasas dropped his bow from

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his hand and did not know what to do. The prince now dicharged an arrow shaped like a crescent and struck down the golden crown on Ravana's head. With his horses dead, his chariot motionless, his bow broken in his hand and his crown removed from his head in the open field, Ravana looked a picture of misery. His breast was also bleeding and he felt helpless. Rama took pity on him and said, "You have done creditable work on the battle-field to-day, O King of the Rakshasas, you are now tired. I will give you permission. Go home. Take rest and come back in another chariot and with fresh weapons. When you are again well-equipped, I will show my strength, not now."

Ravana was ashamed. But, as there was no other course left open for him, he took advantage of the permission given and beat a hasty retreat. The prince also now withdrew from the field with Lakshmana and gave orders that all the wounded should be carefully looked after and himself assisted in ministering to their comfort.

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CHAPTER XL

RAVANA'S pride was thus humbled. He sat dejected amidst his chiefs. Too late he now regretted that he had asked protection only against gods, demigods, demons and Nagas, but not against men and monkeys. He had treated men with contempt and thought that he was unconquerable with the boons he had obtained. He had been frequently cursed for his misdeeds and crimes and been told that a man would arise who would lay him low. He now remembered all those curses and saw how his sins were finding him out. It was a bitter cup for him that, having conquered all the world, he should cower now before a mere man.

Suddenly a thought struck him. He was under a curse, but not so his brother Kumbhakarna. What if he should be roused from his long sleep and sent against this formidable Prince of Ayodhya? His very appearance would strike terror into the heart of the enemy. He was a true Rakshasa, both in body and in mind, and a wise one too. He might succeed in killing Rama and Lakshmana at one stroke. But the trouble was, he had gone to sleep only nine days before the war began. He usually slept from six to nine months, and his sleep would be very heavy in the first month. So mighty

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efforts had to be made to rouse him. But, as there was no help for it, and as the safety of the royal house was in danger, Ravana resolved that he should be roused at any cost and gave the necessary orders.

The rousing of Kumbhakarna from sleep is one of the few comic episodes in the Ramayana. He was a Rakshasa of gigantic proportions and lay sleeping on his bed several miles in length like a mountain range. On the orders of Ravana, the regiment of soldiers under the command of Yupaksha and Mahodara went to the place with the necessary implements. They knew that Kumbhakarna would require enormous quantities of food as soon as he awoke from sleep. So they put beside his bed huge piles of meat of various kinds—venison, pork and beef—and large casks of blood and wine. Then they proceeded to rouse him. They beat drums, blew trumpets, and all of them roared together at the same time in his ears, but in vain. Only the birds in the neighbourhood were scared and flew away in all directions. Then the Rakshasas tried to shake the sleeper, pulled him in all directions, boxed his ears and pinched him. But they produced no effect. Then they scourged him with whips, beat him with iron rods and prodded him with goads. But the sleeper was not

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awakened. Then they began to pull his hair, bite his nose and pour buckets of water into his ears. It was all of no avail. Only some of the Rakshasas were blown off by the powerful current of breath issuing out of the giant's nostrils. Then they drove a herd of elephants on his body. This produced some effect, for he turned a little and began to yawn. At the sight of that opening cave which was his mouth, the elephants were terrified and ran away roaring in all directions. Hearing the noise, Kumbhakarna opened his eyes which were like two lakes of blood. As soon as his eyes caught sight of the hillocks of meat beside his bed, he sat up and began to devour the food. Then he emptied the casks of drink. Meanwhile the Rakshasa soldiers arranged themselves into a column and stood at attention. Kumbhakarna now looked at them with enquiring eyes and said, "Why have you taken the trouble of rousing me from my sleep? I hope the king, my brother, is well. I hope he has nothing to fear." "There *is* something to fear," replied Yupaksha saluting him. "We have never feared the gods or the demigods, but we have now to fear men. The Prince of Ayodhya has come with a large Vanara army and is besieging Lanka. The King of the Rakshasas, your brother, who has been a terror to the world, has just now barely escaped with

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his life from the battle-field with the permission of the Prince."

On hearing this, Kumbhakarna rolled his eyes in anger and cried, "What! Is this true, O Yupaksha? I will first go and kill Rama and Lakshmana, and then come to see my brother."

"Not so, if you please, O mighty prince," said Mahodara, the other Rakshasa chief who had come with Yupaksha. "Is it not better that you first see your brother and take instructions from him before going to meet the enemy?"

"All right," said Kumbhakarna. "Let my brother decide. I will meanwhile prepare myself to start."

With these words he went to wash his face and dress himself, while swift messengers were sent to Ravana to ascertain his will. Word was quickly brought that Ravana would like to see his brother before he went into action. So Kumbhakarna decided to go to the palace and ordered another cask of strong wine for his drink before starting.

As Kumbhakarna walked along the highway to Ravana's palace, the earth shook under his feet and his head was seen towering above the city walls. The Vanaras saw the moving form and ran back terrified. The attention of Rama was drawn to it and he asked Vibhishana who that man-mountain

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was, whose head and shoulders appeared above the city walls. Vibhishana said it was Ravana's brother Kumbhakarna and gave an account of his history, how he was the biggest of the creatures created by Brahma and how, soon after his birth,he greedily devoured so many living beings that the gods complained of his destructive nature to the Creator, who thereupon decreed that he should spend his life in sleep and rise only once in about six months and wander about the earth devouring what he liked.

"He has been now abruptly roused from his sleep, O Prince," concluded Vibhishana. "That shows how terrified Ravana is by the siege of Lanka. He wants to utilise Kumbhakarna's giant strength against you. The Vanaras are likely to be struck with terror when they see him. So it is better they are told that he is not a living being, but a big iron machine brought into the field by the Rakshasas."

Meanwhile the giant reached the palace and went in to see his brother. Ravana acquainted him with all the events that had happened since the last meeting of the council at which Kumbhakarna was present and begged him to save Lanka from the destructive hand of the Prince of Ayodhya. Kumbhakarna laughed and said that what he had

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predicted at that meeting had come true. Ravana had done an evil deed and was reaping the consequences. What their youngest brother Vibhishana had advised them to do should have been done.

Ravana was angry when he heard these words and said that Kumbhakarna was summoned to give help and not advice. What had been done could not be undone. The question before them was how the danger could be overcome, not how it arose. If Kumbhakarna really loved his brother, he should come to his rescue in his difficulty and not reproach him for his past actions. This was the time to serve and not to judge. Would Kumbhakarna put forth his gigantic strength and save Lanka? Put that way, the matter appealed to him and he arose and said, "You need have no fears of any kind, my brother, while I am alive. Any foe who wants to reach you must walk over my dead body. I will go and kill your enemies and remove all your fears. Set your mind at ease and see what I will do."

So saying, Kumbhakarna put on his golden armour, received the blessings of Ravana and set out for the battle-field with a number of Rakshasa chiefs. He asked his followers to come out by the northern gate, while he himself simply stepped over the city walls and reached the outer side. He then

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roared his battle-cry, which fell like a thunderbolt on the ears of the Vanaras. They looked in the direction of the cry and, seeing the giant advance like a walking tower, took to their heels in terror. Even the Vanara leaders were afraid of this spectacle and began to run. Angada saw Kumuda, Gavaksha and Nila running and cried, "Why are you running away, O chiefs? It is only a machine and not a fighting warrior. Come, we will break it." Accordingly many of the Vanaras returned with crags and beams and jagged stones in their hands and threw them on Kumbhakarna. These primitive weapons struck the giant's body and fell to pieces, while he turned fiercely on his assailants and killed many of them. There was great slaughter among the Vanaras, their blood made the ground slippery and so the survivors ran away once more in all directions. Angada once more tried to rally the forces, rebuking them severely. He cried, "Are you not ashamed? You called yourselves heroes and boasted before coming here of your valiant deeds. What has become of all those boasts? Where are you running, you cowards? No quarter will be given to you. Even your wives will scorn you if you run from the battle-field. Come, it is better to die like heroes, fighting the enemy."

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But even these stinging words did not produce much effect on the fleeing Vanaras. Only a few leaders responded to Angada's call. Headed by Hanuman they fearlessly marched against Kumbhakarna and once more hurled their weapons on his body. A jagged stone from Hanuman's hand struck the Rakshasa on his breast and he began to bleed. But, without heeding his wound, he struck Hanuman with a lance and the Vanara chief fell down spouting blood. Then Nila, Sarabha, Gavaksha and Gandhamadana assailed Kumbhakarna on all sides. But he was more than a match for all of them. He struck one with his fist, kicked another with his foot, and squeezed a third till he vomited blood. In this way he overcame all of them and was looking about, when some more of the Vanara chiefs flew up and lighted on the various parts of the giant's body and began to bite him with their teeth, tear him with their nails and pound him with their fists and knees. He tried to shake them off. But they hung on to him tenaciously tearing and biting. So he pulled handfuls of them from his body and began to put them into his capacious mouth and swallow them. Now Angada tried to prevent him from doing this by hurling a crag against his forehead. Kumbhakarna was hit hard and, slightly reeling, threw his lance at his foe. But Angada

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dexterously jumped aside and avoided the blow. And, while Kumbhakarna was looking for his weapon, he ran against him and dealt a severe blow on his chest. The Rakshasa turned round and struck Angada so hard that he fell down senseless. Seeing the plight of Angada, Sugriva, his uncle, ran to the place where he had fallen. Meanwhile Kumbhakarna picked up his weapon and went for Sugriva and hurled it against him. He, however, missed his aim and the heavy iron bar fell on the ground. Hanuman, who had by now recovered, came to the rescue of his chief, picked up the weapon and broke it into two against his knee. Seeing that his weapon was broken, Kumbhakarna picked up a jagged stone and hit Sugriva so hard that he fell down unconscious. The, Rakshasa now stopped fighting and, lifting up the unconscious Sugriva, carried him on his shoulders to Lanka. He thought, that if the King of the Vanaras was held a prisoner, his army would capitulate without further fighting.

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CHAPTER XLI

BUT, while he was carrying the precious burden half way, Sugriva came to himself and bit off the nose and the ears of the unwary giant, jumped down and escaped. Mad with pain and anger, Kumbhakarna returned to the battle-field, picking up an iron mace on the way. He then fell on the Vanara army like an avalanche, sweeping everything in his way and causing great destruction. Thousands of Vanaras perished under his mace. The ground became slushy with their blood. None could arrest his march,—no, not even Lakshmana who discharged several arrows against him. Kumbhakarna now pursued his way straight to where Rama was, because all the terror-stricken Vanaras were flying in that direction and taking shelter behind him. On seeing the giant approach him, Rama cried, "Come on, O Rakshasa. I am ready to receive you. Bow in hand, Rama is here to meet you, O enemy of the gods, and send you where you deserve to go."

With a hideous laugh Kumbhakarna ran against the prince saying, "I am coming, O Ikshvaku Prince. I know your grand achievements. But I am not Viradha or Kabandha. I am not Vali or Maricha. But I am Kumbhakarna, the terror of the gods, demigods and demons. Look at this

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mace in my hand. Take care, I am going to kill you with this and eat you up afterwards."

A terrible duel succeeded this war of words. The prince discharged arrow upon arrow without a stop, while the Rakshasa, whirling his mace, struck many of them down before they reached him. The Vanaras and the Rakshasas stopped all fighting and looked on in breathless suspense. Kumbhakarna turned this way and that to avoid the piercing arrows and rushed against the prince to use his mace. But the prince with great agility faced him in whatever directions he turned and gave him no breathing space. This went on for some minutes, and Rama, finding that ordinary arrows were of no use against the Rakshasa, dicharged a missile sacred to the wind-god. This weapon tore off Kumbhakarna's right arm along with the mace, which fell down on some Vanaras standing at a distance crushing them to death. The Rakshasa bellowed with pain and, taking up a heavy club with his left hand, rushed against the prince. But the latter readily discharged another missile equally powerful, which cut off the giant's left arm with the club in it. Though Kumbhakarna, had lost both his arms, he did not stop in his mad career. He had still his powerful legs and thought he could trample his enemy to death.

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But Rama did not allow him to come near, for with a pair of sharp missles he cut off the giant's legs. Kumbhakarna consequently fell with a mighty crash. He was now only a hideous trunk devoid of arms and legs. And yet he opened his cave-like mouth and swept into it with his long tongue the Vanaras among whom he fell. The prince saw this and discharged a volley of arrows into his mouth and disabled his tongue. And finally he discharged a flaming missile which severed Kumbhakarna's head from the trunk and swept them both out of sight. The head rose in the air and dashed itself against the gateposts of Lanka, while the trunk was thrown into the sea, where, under its weight, a good many creatures living in the water perished.

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CHAPTER XLII

WHEN Ravana heard of the death of his brother Kumbhakarna, he swooned away, and after he recovered he lamented the loss for a long time. For Kumbhakarna had been a tower of strength to him.

"What have I to do with Lanka or Sita hereafter?" cried the King of the Rakshasas. "What my brother Vibhishana predicted has come to pass. I have been unfair and unjust to him. And all this misery is the result of that. I don't want to live any longer. It is better for me to go where Kumbhakarna has gone."

When he was thus speaking in despair, four of the princes of the royal household, Trisira, Devantaka, Narantaka and Atikaya, came forward, consoled the king and said that they would all take the field immediately and drive away the enemy. Ravana was pleased with their readiness. But, as the princes were young, he asked his brothers, Mahodara and Mahaparsva to accompany them and strengthen their hands in overcoming their foes. Thus these six Rakshasa chiefs started for the battle-field with the usual pomp and show, loudly proclaiming that they would either conquer or die.

That day saw a bloody battle between the Vanaras and the Rakshasas. Many heroic deeds

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were done on both sides and there was great slaughter. In a very short time the entire field was strewn with broken weapons—crags and trees, swords, spears and maces—as well as dying soldiers, and streams of blood ran on the ground. For a long time the result of the battle hung in the balance. But at last the Vanaras won. Of the Rakshasa princes Narantaka was the first to fall. He was killed by Angada. Then it was the turn of Devantaka. He died a hideous death by a blow which Hanuman gave him on his head. Nila then, armed with a crag, crushed Mahodara to death along with his elephant. Hanuman, after killing Devantaka, turned against Trisira and, wresting his sword from his hand, cut off his head, while Rishabha in a similar manner, wresting the iron mace from the hand of Mahaparsva, struck him with it and despatched him.

Thus only Atikaya was left to contend single-handed against the Vanara chiefs. He was the son of Queen Dhanyamali, one of the favourite wives of Ravana. His name was significant, because, though still young, he had a body of gigantic proportions. In fact, next to his uncle Kumbhakarna, he possessed the biggest body in Lanka. When first he appeared on the battle-field, the Vanaras flew away in terror, thinking that Kumbhakarna had

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come to life again. But Vibhishana dispelled their fears and urged the Vanara chiefs to face him courageously. Encouraged by his words four of them–Kumuda, Dvivida, Mainda and Nila–assiled Atikaya on all sides with their weapons. But the Rakshasa prince was more than a match for all of them. With his arrows he broke their weapons to pieces drove them away and fell on the rank and file of the Vanaras, and caused great distruction. Elated with this success, he marched against Rama himself and challenged him to fight. Lakshmana now stepped in and accepted the challenge and twanged his bow. But the proud Rakshasa exclaimed, "You are too young, O Lakshmana, to contend with me. Get away and don't court death. If you persist, I will discharge this arrow which will drink your heart's blood."

"Mere words don't make one a hero," replied Lakshmana. "Come, don't boast, but show by your deeds your valour and strength, O Rakshasa. My arrow will now whizz through the air and bring your head down like a ripe palmyra fruit."

Then ensued a terrible fight between the two young princes. Both were experts in wielding celestial weapons as well as in discharging arrows. Each skilfully countered the missiles that the other hurled at him. For a long time it was mere touch

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and go on either side. This wonderful trial of skill and strength was eagerly watched not only by the Vanaras and Rakshasas below, but also by the gods and demigods in the air above. The wind-god was among the throng. He flew down at the critical moment and whispered in the ear of Lakshmana, "Use the Brahma weapon, no other can penetrate that armour of his, which he got as a boon from Brahma."

Lakshmana took the hint and hurled the irresistible Brahma weapon. With tongues of fire went the missile from Lakshmana's bow straight at the throat of the Rakshasa. The latter knew what was coming and used all the weapons he had knowledge of to encounter it, but in vain. His head was severed and thrown at some distance. The fight was over.

The Rakshasas fled panic-stricken and Ravana heard the doleful news of the death of his four sons and two brothers in the course of a single day's fight. Tears trickled down his cheeks, as he thought of the young princes thus cut off in the prime of their youth. Indrajit was by and he tried to console his father. "All is not lost, my father," said he. "I am still alive. And you will see what I will do to the enemy to-day. You may take them as dead —those two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana. You

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should not give way to despair as long as Indrajit is alive."

With these words he leapt into his chariot and drove to the battle-field. But, as he always relied more on his witchcraft than on the strength of his arm, he kindled a fire in a corner of the field, set guards all round it and performed a magic rite and cast a spell over his chariot, bow and arrows. He then got into his chariot again, which, as a result of the magic spell, rose into the sky and became invisible. Thus, hidden from the gaze of the armies fighting below, he rained flaming arrows, secret weapons and rare missiles on the enemy. The Vanaras were unable to see the source from which the arrows came. Those who raised their eyes to the sky at once lost their eyesight and fell down blinded. The Rakshasa concentrated his attention on the Vanara leaders, who fell one after another, unable to do anything against this unknown terror from the sky. The turn of Rama and Lakshmana came at last. They too could do nothing to defend themselves and shared the fate of their renowned generals who lay senseless on the ground. Indrajit began these astonishing operations a little before sunset and by nightfall his work was over. It was like a dreadful hail-storm before which nothing could stand. In less than

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two hours the whole Vanara army was laid low. Many were killed, many blinded and almost all were rendered unconscious. The darkness of the night fell over a silent field, for Indrajit and his Rakshasa army had gone home rejoicing, before twilight faded away.

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CHAPTER XLIII

VIBHISHANA was the first to stir in the darkness. Being a Rakshasa, he was not affected by Indrajit's witchcraft as much as the Vanaras. He rose and said, "Don't lose heart, O Vanaras. The Princes will come to themselves soon. They cannot long be subject to the influence of Indrajit's arts." Hanuman, who was lying near, heard these words and, shaking off his stupor, said, "I am glad you say so, O Vibhishana. Let us go about and see how many of our Vanaras are still alive and how many are dead."

They lighted two torches and went about looking at the faces of the fallen heroes. They saw many Vanaras with broken limbs and mutilated bodies sleeping their last sleep in pools of blood. They searched for the body of the venerable Jambavan, the great veteran who had fought many a fight during his long life and who was as valiant in battle as he was wise in counsel. Fortunately, they found him alive, though fallen.

"How are you, sir?" asked Vibhishana. "I hope those flaming darts from the sky have not taken too great a toll from your venerable person."

"From your voice I think you are Vibhishana," replied the old veteran in a feeble and broken voice scarcely audible. 'I have been hit hard in the face,

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so I am unable to see anything. What a slaughter, O Vibhishana! May I know whether Hanuman of celestial birth is still alive?"

"Why are you thinking of Hanuman, sir?" asked Vibhishana, with a glance at Hanuman, who was standing by with a torch in his hand. "Why are you thinking of him, in preference to Rama and Lakshmana or Sugriva and Angada?"

"I am thinking of Hanuman," he replied, "because, if he is alive, it does not matter even if all others have fallen. But, if he is dead, it does not matter even if all others are alive. If Hanuman is alive, we are all alive, and there is no cause for fear. But, if he is dead, we are as good as dead, though alive, and we may give up all hope."

Hanuman was profoundly moved to hear these words and he bent down and clasped the feet of the venerable old warrior and expressed his thanks with tears in his eyes and a catch in his voice. Jambavan rejoiced to know that Hanuman was alive and said, "Come here, my hero. There is work for you. You will have to save this army. None else can do it."

Hanuman sat beside him and bent his ear to receive the instructions of the old veteran.

"You will have to fly, O Hanuman," said the latter, "across the sea and far, far away over the

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mainland to the great Himalayan heights. There hidden among the clouds you will find two summits, one of gold and the other of silver. The former is known as Rishabha and the latter as Kailasa. Between the two lies another summit on which grow many wonderful herbs. And of these there are four which have marvellous healing powers. They can set right broken limbs, bring together sundered parts, restore the glow of health and bring back the dead to life. Go at once and bring these four precious herbs."

Hanuman leapt with joy and flew as only he could fly. With outspread arms and tilted head he flew so fast in the sky that the sea with Rama's bridge and the mountains, rivers, forests, cities and villages on the mainland seemed under his eyes to be running with tremendous speed from north to south. He reached the place at last and searched for the herbs, but he could not find them. They seemed to have hidden themselves, lest he should dislodge them from their native soil. But Hanuman was not one who could be defeated in his purpose. He tore off the entire peak, with all the herbs growing there, from the mountain and flew back to Lanka. As soon as he reached the battle-field the wind that blew over the magic herbs touched the bodies of those who were lying there. At once

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they leapt into life, and their wounds were healed. The dead, the dying and the unconscious rose, as if from a refreshing sleep. And the Vanara army became as strong as at the beginning of the war. No Rakshasa soldiers who had fallen shared the benefit of the healing herbs, because by Ravana's orders all the dead bodies in his army had been then and there removed from the field and thrown into the sea.

The Vanaras in their new-found strength did not want to take any more rest that night. So they lighted their torches and marched against the unsuspecting Rakshasas and made a surprise attack and set fire to their buildings and caused great destruction. Ravana was angry and sent Kumbha and Nikumbha, the sons of Kumbhakarna, to repulse the invaders. But after a furious fight these two princes were slain and along with them a number of other Rakshasa chiefs. Their place was afterwards taken by Makaraksha, the son of Khara, whom Rama had fought and slain in Janasthana. But Makaraksha soon shared the fate of his father and died by a shaft from Rama's bow.

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CHAPTER XLIV

WHEN Ravana heard of the slaughter of all these princes, he gnashed his teeth and once more sent for Indrajit and begged him to take the field and retrieve the honour of Lanka. Indrajit once more had recourse to his witchcraft. But this time he played a monstrous trick on the enemy. He wanted to gain time for an elaborate sacrifice to Nikumbhila, the guardian deity of Lanka. If the sacrifice could be completed without interruption, he would be equipped with arms which would make him invincible. But if he should be interrupted in the middle of it, he would meet with certain death at the hands of his enemy. So to keep the Vanara army engaged during the time of the sacrifice he created a magic figure which exactly resembled Sita as she was at the time in the Asoka grove, emaciated, unkempt and unwashed, and took it with him in his chariot.

Right in front of Hanuman he stopped his chariot and seizing this unreal Sita by the hair began to beat her. And to keep up the illusion the figure was made to cry in a voice exactly resembling that of the princess, "O Rama, O Rama." The sight was too much for Hanuman and he burst out into wild words of abuse and fiercely attacked the miscreant Rakshasa. But the latter ably defended,

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himself and, lifting the figure by its hair, said, "Look here. I am going to kill this woman for whose sake you have all come here. With a single stroke of my sword I will foil all your attempts."

With these words, Indrajit gave a slashing blow to the figure, which, spouting blood and crying "O Rama", fell down lifeless at his feet. Hanuman and his followers could scarcely believe their eyes. It was an unimaginable outrage and the end of all their hopes. Some of them fled back in terror. But Hanuman, mad with anger and sorrow, egged on those who stayed with him to fly at the throats of the Rakshasas and tear them to pieces and give them no quarter. He himself took up a big boulder that was lying on the ground with both his hands and hurled it at the head of Indrajit with many a curse. The enemy would have met with instantaneous death, had not his charioteer driven the chariot away from the spot before the stone fell down.

Then ensued a terrible fight between the Rakshasas and the Vanaras, in which they tore one another with their nails in their mad frenzy and bit one another with their teeth and trampled one another under foot. During this melee Indrajit escaped and fled to the temple of Nikumbhila to perform his sacrifice. The Vanaras, after killing a

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large number of the Rakshasas who opposed them, became exhausted and saw there was no use in pursuing their victory.

"Let us return, O Vanaras," cried Hanuman. "We have come to rescue the Princess and not merely to kill these vile Rakshasas. And she for whose sake we were prepared to give up our lives is now no more. Let us return now and take orders from the Prince as to what we should do next."

Accordingly they turned back. Meanwhile the prince, hearing the noise of this confused fight from his quarter of the field and, recognising the voice of Hanuman at its highest pitch, asked Jambavan to go and find out whom the Vanaras were fighting and whether they required any help. Jambavan ran as fast as his legs could carry him and saw Hanuman and his heroic band returning with downcast looks. They told him what had happened and he returned along with them. They continued their solemn march to where Rama was standing, anxious to hear the news. Hanuman went up to him and told him of the unspeakable outrage and of the seeming end of all their hopes. The prince heard the news and fell down like a mighty tree cut at the root. The Vanaras ran in all directions and fetched some water and sprinkled it on his face Lakshmana

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heard the news and ran to his brother. He took Rama's head in his lap and tried in vain to restore him. In a bitter mood he assailed the world saying that it was a godless world in which virtue came to grief and vice always flourished and that it was foolish on the part of men to forgo their comforts and follow what they call Dharma, which is nothing but a will-o'-the-wisp of their own imagination. For here was his brother whose god was Dharma, but who, in consequence of this worship, had lost his all, his throne, his happiness and his wife.

While Lakshmana was thus wailing and his brother was slowly regaining consciousness, Vibhishana came to them from his quarter of the battle-field and enquired why they were all in tears. On being told the cause of their grief, he cried, "I think Indrajit is again at his tricks of witchcraft. Ravana would never have permitted him to seize the Princess. He would never have consented to let her go out of his hands. I am afraid Indraji has gone to the temple of Nikumbhila to perform his magic rites and make himself invincible. It is your duty now, O Vanaras, to go at once and interrupt the rite."

The Vanaras looked at Rama and Lakshmana, and the former said in a feeble voice, "What

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is it that you say, O Vibhishana? I am unable to follow you." Vibhishana then repeated what he had said and urged that a company of the Vanaras should go at once and interrupt Indrajit's sacrifice before it was completed. The prince now saw the danger and bade Lakshmana and Hanuman go with a picked force and see that the magic rite in the temple was not completed. Accordingly they started. Vibhishana led the way and pointed out the place to them. The Vanara force went up and found that the grove was guarded all around by Rakshasa troops armed to the teeth. So they had to surround them and wage a fierce battle before they could go in. At last a breach was made and the Vanaras rushed in. Indrajit saw that he could no longer proceed with the rite. He got up and ascended his chariot, which was kept ready for him in a corner of the grove, and came out. Immediately he was surrounded by a squad of Vanaras sent by Hanuman. But Indrajit was not in the least daunted. His sharp arrows pierced his assailants in their vital parts and they began to fall. Seeing how the Vanaras were losing the battle, Vibhishana urged Lakshmana to go to the rescue of Hanuman. When Indrajit saw Lakshmana advancing against him with Vibhishna by his side, he burst into bitter invectives against his uncle.

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"Traitor," he cried, "are you not ashamed of yourself? Ungrateful wretch, you have not only deserted the land of your birth and your kith and kin, but have actually joined the enemy and are giving away all our secrets. I am your brother's son, and yet you are heartlessly leading the enemy against me. You will profit nothing by this, you vile renegade. Your friends will get all the help they can from you and then put you to death in the end."

"Don't rail against me," replied Vibhishna, "as if you did not know why I left you all. You know full well how often I have tried to save Lanka and its rulers from the consequences of their evil deeds, how often I raised my voice in public and in private against their violence, robbery and adultery. A thousand times I warned you that violence would breed violence, that sin would bring destruction and death in its train, and that your crimes against womankind would not go unpunished. You have insulted me and rejected, my advice. I had to shake you off as a man shakes off a serpent which coils itself round his arm. It is to save Lanka, the land of my birth, that I have joined the righteous Prince of Ayodhya. It is you that are ruining Lanka, not I. After the whole brood of you, the evil progeny of Ravana, is destroyed, Lanka will be restored to peace and

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health, not before. Come, meet your death to-day at the hands of Lakshmana."

Indrajit knew, when his sacrifice was interrupted, that his fate was sealed. So he fought desperately that day. His witchcraft was now at an end. He could no longer fly or hide himself behind the clouds or remain invisible and fight. He had to rely entirely on his strength and skill. So it was an equal fight between him and Lakshmana that day. Both of them fought long and desperately. Each countered the arrows of the other. Each struck down the celestial weapons that the other threw. And at one stage each broke to pieces the armour of the other, and each inflicted wounds on the other.

This equal fight went on for hours. Lakshmana first gained an advantage by killing his enemy's charioteer. But Indrajit at once took the reins in his own hand and became his own charioteer and continued to discharge his arrows as skillfully as before. Now four of the Vanara chiefs rushed against the chariot and killed the horses at one stroke. But undaunted by the loss, Indrajit jumped down from his chariot and began to fill the air with his arrows and cause great destruction among the Vanaras. The Rakshasas took advantage of this and rushed against the Vanaras and broke their array.

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There was now a general confusion. And in this confusion Indrajit escaped unnoticed, ran to the reserves and came back seated in another chariot fully equipped with fresh horses, an able charioteer, and shining arms of various kinds. Lakshmana, Vibhishana, Hanuman and others were surprised at this swift movement of Indrajit and redoubled their efforts on all sides. The Rakshasas too began to assail the Vanaras with sharper arrows and make them flee shrieking with pain. But Lakshmana soon put a stop to this by breaking Indrajit's bow and piercing his breast with five keen arrows. Indrajit quickly took up another bow, but Lakshmana as quickly broke that too. Undaunted, the Rakshasa took up a third bow and began to shower arrows as keen as razor blades. Meanwhile Lakshmana succeeded in killing his charioteer. But, strange to tell, even without a charioteer the horses guided themselves and the chariot made as quick movements as before. While Vibhishana and the Vanaras were looking with surprise at the horses, Indrajit pierced them all with his arrows. Vibhishana was enraged and dashed forward with a heavy mace in his hand and struck down the horses. Indrajit once more jumped to the ground and carried on the fight. Then ensued a fierce combat between him and Lakshmana. Both of

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them were experts in the use of celestial weapons. The skill with which each handled these missiles and countered those of his opponent was wonderful. The fight lasted long and was dreadful to behold. The Rakshasas and the Vanaras stopped fighting and looked on in terror. The gods and demigods hovered over the battle-field and looked on in amazement. Both the Heroes fought desperately, till at last Lakshmana took up the potent Indra missile and, before discharging it, uttered these words like a mantra: "If Rama, the son of Dasaratha, is righteous, truthful and peerless in valour, go, O weapon, from my hand and kill the son of Ravana."

The weapon leaped from Lakshmana's hand, rushed through the air and cut off Indrajit's head, before anybody knew what was happening. Next to his father, Indrajit was the greatest enemy of the gods. By his magic and witchcraft as well as by his skill in archery and the use of celestial weapons he had harassed them on many a battle-field and had acquired the title of the Conqueror of the King of the Gods. So at the fall of this hated enemy the gods above shouted in joy, the demigods sang and danced, while the Vanaras below cried themselves hoarse with the words "Victory, Victory to Lakshmana" and ran to Rama to communicate

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to him the glad news. The Prince of Ayodhya was pleased beyond words with the achievement of his brother, and when the latter approached him along with the Vanara chiefs, he embraced him and kissed him, saying, "Well done, my beloved Lakshmana. We have won the war. Now that Indrajit is gone, Ravana's right hand is cut off. He will be no formidable opponent hereafter."

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CHAPTER XLV

WHEN Ravana heard of the fall of Indrajit he fell into a swoon and took a long time in coming to himself. And, when he did, he wailed most piteously, calling his dead son by all the endearing names he had used when he was a little child. "Where have you gone, my son?" he cried. "You should have followed and not preceded me. Contrary to the order of nature, I have to perform your obsequies instead of your performing mine. My enemies are still at the gate. With whom shall I go now to meet them?"

But sorrow soon gave place to anger in the mind of the Rakshasa. His eyes became red with wrath against the enemy who had killed his son. He wanted to take vengeance, swift and certain, on the man who had caused him all this woe and humiliation. He thought for a while and jumped up, as a new idea struck him. "I will do now in earnest" cried he, "what my son did in jest. He killed only an illusory figure resembling Sita. I will now kill the real woman who has brought all this ruin on my head. That is the best way of taking vengeance on the enemy for the loss of my beloved son." Having announced his evil intention to his ministers, he seized a sword and rushed to the Asoka grove.

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The princess saw him coming, hissing like a serpent, and his ministers running after him with frightened faces. She had vaguely heard of the fall of Indrajit from her guards and was not sure whether Ravana was coming to kill her, as he could not kill Rama and Lakshmana, or whether, having already killed them, he was coming to kill her also. In that moment of suspense her mind went back to her last meeting with Ravana, the threats he uttered then and the meeting with Hanuman which followed close on them. She regretted that she had not accepted Hanuman's offer to take her on his back to Rama. If she had done so, all this war and the destruction of so many lives could have been avoided. She had no time for further thought and fell down cowering on the ground, prepared for the worst. Meanwhile, fortunately for her, Ravana was prevented from coming near her to execute his foul purpose by a minister called Suparsva. The minister intervened and said that it was cowardly for a high-born king to kill a helpless woman.

"Do not disgrace yourself and your family, O King," he cried. "Go and vent your wrath on your enemies, Rama and Lakshmana. Kill them and make this beautiful Princess your own. Start to-day. It is a most auspicious day. To-morrow is the New Moon."

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Ravana took the advice of his minister, went back and started for the battle-field with the surviving Rakshasa chiefs. He instructed his followers to go and engage Rama in particular in battle and wear him out as much as they could. And then he would follow and finish their work.

Thus began a fierce battle at sunrise that day between the Rakshasas and the Vanaras. As usual, the former went to work with their bows and arrows, their swords, daggers, maces and battle-axes, and the latter with crags and trees and their teeth and nails. For a long time the fight was even, each side inflicting heavy losses on the other. But the tide turned at last in favour of the Rakshasas, and the Vanaras fled and sought shelter behind the prince. As the prince, according to Ravana's orders, was to be the main target that day, the Rakshasas were glad that he came forward to defend the vanquished Vanaras. But the result was far otherwise than what they had hoped for. Instead of their wearing out the prince, he wore them out and chased the whole force back to the gates of Lanka. Thousands died on the way and there was great lamentation among the women in the city when the result of the battle was made known. Ravana bit his lip when he knew that his plan had gone awry and ordered all his

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reserves to go out with him at once and offer battle to the enemy. Most of his generals had already fallen. There were only three more, Virupaksha, Mahodara and Mahaparsva, and they accompanied him. Though they knew it was the last throw of the dice, they made a brave show and started out of the main gate with streaming banners, neighing steeds and rolling chariots. But at the very start their spirits were damped by the ghastly omens they saw. The sun was suddenly overcast The earth had a tremor. The horses stumbled on their way. And birds of prey with hideous cries came and settled on their banners. Though it was not night, the troops heard the hooting of owls and the cries of jackals. Ravana lost his voice for a time, his face became pale and his left arm and eye began to throb. Destiny, however, drove him on, and he could not turn back.

The sight of the Vanaras that day filled Ravana with a mad frenzy. For the depression of spirits he had experienced they had now to pay with their broken heads, torn limbs and mutilated faces. He fell on the enemy's forces like an avalanche and swept everything before him. He had ordered the generals that accompanied him to deploy their armies and spread themselves over the entire front and engage the enemy at different points at the

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same time. Accordingly, Virupaksha, Mahodara and Mahaparsva stationed themselves at a considerable distance from one another and attacked the enemy in front of them. But they had not the success which crowned Ravana's efforts. They fought valiantly and even desperately, but in vain. Virupaksha and Mahodara were ultimately struck down by Sugriva, and Mahaparsva by Angada.

When Ravana heard of the fall of his generals and the rout of the Rakshasas led by them, he asked his charioteer to drive his chariot to that part of the field where Rama and Lakshmana were fighting, so that by striking at the princes he might put heart into his army. Lakshmana was the first to see him coming and at once discharged a volley of arrows against him. But Ravana struck them down before they reached him and, without paying any heed to Lakshmana, went up to Rama and attacked him.

Thus began the fight between the two main heroes, Rama and Ravana. Both were great experts in wielding the bow, both had knowledge of celestial weapons and both were desperate that day. Therefore the fight was long and equal and was eagerly watched by the armies on either side. Ravana discharged an Asura missile from his bow and it assumed the forms of several beasts of prey and

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several poisonous serpents, which began to assail Rama on all sides howling and hissing. But Rama countered it by an Agni missile which assumed the forms of burning torches, trailing comets and dazzling suns and burnt up the enemy's weapon. Again Ravana discharged a Rudra missile, which took the forms of several weapons, such as swords, spears, daggers and maces, and assailed the prince, who countered it with a Gandharva missile. In this way the trial of strength went on. Celestial weapons of various kinds were hurled at each other by the heroes. While this equal fight was going on, Lakshmana aimed a deadly shaft at the charioteer of Ravana and killed him. Just at this time Vibhishana also came up and hurled his heavy mace and killed the horses that drew Ravana's chariot. Ravana, mad with anger when he saw his brother ranged up against him, jumped from his chariot and threw a deadly weapon called Sakti against him. Lakshmana intervened to save Vibhishana and received the weapon on his breast and fell down senseless. Rama at once ran to him and took him in his lap. But the piercing arrows of Ravana, forced him to leave Lakshmana to the care of the Vanara chiefs and face his foe again. His spirit was roused and, before leaving his dear brother who was lying unconscious on the ground, he solemnly

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declared that in a short time the world should be rid of either Ravana or Rama.

Thus began the second phase of the deadly conflict between the two heroes. They stood on the field and rained arrows on each other. Ravana had no longer the advantage of being in a chariot and making swift movements. He had to rely entirely on the strength of his arm and his skill in wielding his bow. So within a short time he was overpowered and he cautiously began to withdraw. The prince could not follow up his victory and chase his foe, as he was anxious to go back to his fallen brother. He returned to Lakshmana and found him still unconscious and still bleeding profusely. He feared that his dear brother might not recover at all and began to weep and wail, saying that, if Lakshmana died, neither victory, nor the destruction of Ravana, nor the recovery of Sita, nor life itself would be of any use to him. But the old Sushena, the father-in-law of Sugriva, examined the body of Lakshmana and consoled Rama saying that there was every hope of recovery. He bade Hanuman fly at once to a certain mountain peak and fetch a healing herb, as he had fetched before at the instance of Jambavan. Hanuman flew and, swift as thought, returned with the herb. Sushena crushed it between his hands

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and dropped the juice into Lakshmana's nostrils. Lakshmana then drew a long breath and in a short time opened his eyes and sat up. When he came to know that Rama had allowed Ravana to escape on account of him, he gently blamed his brother for being over-fond of him and neglecting his duty.

"The sooner you perform your duty by the Pri..cess," said Lakshmana, "the better for us all."

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CHAPTER XLVI

MEANWHILE Ravana returned to the battlefield in another chariot and the third phase of the combat began. The king of the gods now saw that, if Rama had no chariot, while Ravana had one, the fight would not be fair, and so he sent the prince his own chariot and his own charioteer, Matali. The prince gratefully accepted the gift and mounted the chariot of Indra and faced the enemy of the gods. Once more the Rakshasas and the Vanaras below and the gods and demigods above witnessed a marvellous display of skill in the use of celestial as well as earthly weapons on both sides. A Gandharva weapon met another Gandharva weapon, a Daiva met another Daiva. If Ravana hurled a Rakshasa missile and produced a brood of flying serpents, Rama countered it with a Garuda and produced a flight of vultures which ate up the serpents. If Ravana hurled a mighty spear, Rama broke it to pieces with a flaming Sakti. If Ravana wounded Rama with a hundred arrows on his chest, Rama replied with a thousand arrows which wounded Ravana all over the body. Thus went on this terrible combat for many anxious hours. Nobody on earth could say who would win. But the gods above observed that, while Ravana went on using

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the same old celestial weapons, Rama was on the spur of the moment improvising new ones which they themselves had not heard of before. The disparity was slight at first, but became more pronounced as the fight went on, and Ravana's powers seemed to flag, while Rama seemed to gain more strength. At last a stage was reached when the King of the Rakshasas became bewildered and looked this way and that without bending his bow. The alarming sign was noticed at once by his charioteer, who swiftly drove away the chariot from the battle-field, Rama as usual disdaining to harass a fleeing foe.

The chariot had not gone far from the field of battle before Ravana awoke from his stupor and severely rebuked the charioteer for withdrawing without his permission. The charioteer hotly replied that it was to save Ravana's life that he had done so and that he had correctly discharged a charioteer's duty. Ravana was satisfied, but asked him to drive back to the battle-field, so that he might retrieve his honour, for it was disgraceful for the King of the Rakshasas to flee from his enemy. The charioteer obeyed the orders and brought Ravana again face to face with Rama.

Meanwhile the sage Agastya, who had been keenly following the contest between Rama and

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Ravana with his yogic powers of vision, knew that the contest was entering on its final phase and so wanted to strengthen the prince for it. He flew down into Rama's chariot and taught him to recite a potent prayer called Aditya-hridaya to the Light of the Universe. He asked him to concentrate his mind on the prayer and invoke divine aid before engaging the enemy who was returning to the battle-field. The prince obeyed and prepared himself in the manner indicated by the sage for the final phase of the deadly battle.

"See, O Matali," he then cried to his charioteer, "how the Rakshasa is hurrying to his death now. I feel confident that I can slay him to-day. You have to be very wary in your driving and lead me to victory. Of course, being the charioteer of the king of the gods, you know everything, you don't require any instruction from me. I am only reminding you of what you have to do."

Matali obeyed and led the attack. The two chariots clashed against each other and the fourth and last phase of the battle began. Once again ominous portents were seen on all sides. All of a sudden there arose a whirlwind and raised a column of dust, blinding Ravana's eyes. A dark cloud came up and rained big drops of blood on his.

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chariot, while birds of prey hovered over his head with hideous cries. And though it was the middle of day, a reddish twilight enveloped the whole of Lanka and made the city appear to be on fire. Ravana knew the meaning of these portents and fought on desperately. He aimed a flaming dart at the banner of Rama's chariot, but it just touched its target and fell down. Rama discharged a similar arrow at Ravana's banner, which in consequence was torn to shreds. The King of the Rakshasas grew red in the face when his banner was broken and showered deadly weapons of various kinds on the chariot of his enemy. But Rama countered them all with his swift arrows, and they fell in splinters on the Vanaras who were by his side. The charioteers on both sides drove their chariots as they had never driven them before making a thousand complicated movements, now wheeling to the right, now wheeling to the left, and now advancing, now receding. And all the time the heroes in the chariots hurled without interruption deadly missiles against each other. The Rakshasas and the Vanaras stopped fighting on every front and crowded round the arena where the two chariots went at each other and glided away and returned to the charge like two angry cobras. With unwinking eyes they gazed on this terrible

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conflict between Rama and Ravana and appeared like figures in a picture. The troops of gods and demigods who were witnessing the battle from the sky trembled for the safety of the world and ejaculated prayers for the victory of righteousness and justice. The battle went on throughout the day and throughout the night without any intermission and Rama often wondered why his missiles, which had been so effective against Khara and Dooshana, against Viradha and Kabandha, were so powerless against Ravana. Each time he sent out a deadly missile he expected the enemy's head to be cut off, but each time he was disappointed and puzzled. Matali divined what was passing through the prince's mind and said that Ravana's hour had not yet come, but was approaching. So Rama went on without slackening his efforts, discharging at the enemy's head every earthly and celestial weapon he knew. Nor did Ravana slacken in the least. He knew he was like the trunk of a mighty tree whose branches had been lopped off and at whose roots the axe was busy striking blow on blow. Therefore he was desperate and went on hitting with all his might. He was like an animal turned to bay whom even the most skilful huntsman dreads. It was now a question of endurance rather than of skill. Each side wanted to wear out the other. The last

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phase of the fight was, therefore, unlike the first three phases, more wearisome than dreadful. But the end came at last rather suddenly. For, while the Rakshasas and the Vaṇaras were wondering how long this peerless combat was to continue, Matali whispered in the ear of the prince, "His hour is struck. The moment fixed by the high gods for his fall has arrived. Delay not, but take a Brahma missile and discharge it immediately."

The prince took that weapon in his hand, duly and deliberately repeated the mantra that gives it high potency and hurled it with all his might at Ravana. The weapon whizzed through the air with a blinding flash, penetrated the chest of the King of the Rakshasas and fell on the other side. Ravana's mighty bow with the arrow on the string dropped from his hand and he fell back dead from his chariot. The Rakshasas could scarcely believe their eyes. The end was so sudden. While they were looking on bewildered, the Vanaras, with their shrill cries of 'Victory', leaped on them and tore some of them to pieces and chased the rest back to the gates of Lanka. Now that the dreaded enemy of the gods was dead, flowers of Paradise were showered upon the righteous Prince of Ayodhya. The sun shone bright. A gentle breeze wafted the

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fragrance of heaven to the earth. The gods sang hymns of praise and the celestial damsels danced in joy, while the friends of Rama—Sugriva, Hanuman and Vibhishana—together with Lakshmana, crowded round their leader with shouts of triumph.

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CHAPTER XLVII

WHEN Vibhishana saw his brother lying dead on the battle-field, he began to shed genuine tears of sorrow, saying, "Are you dead at last, O dreaded hero? I warned you against this end. But blinded by lust, you did not heed my words. You reaped what you had sown. But to-day, as you lie in the dust here, the world appears to me to have become empty. We have lost an illustrious, all-powerful hero." The prince consoled the mourner and said, "He has fallen fighting to the last, O Vibhishana, and he is bound to go to the heaven reserved for heroes who die bravely on the field of battle. So give up grief, my friend, and think of what has to be done next." Thereupon Vibhishana begged permission for the funeral rites to be performed according to custom, and the prince nobly replied, "All enmity ends with death. My object has been fulfilled. Do perform his obsequies, O Vibhishana. Hereafter he is to me what he is to you."

By this time, Queen Mandodari and the other queens, having heard of Ravana's death came wailing to the spot where he lay. They fell upon his mangled corpse and cried piteously, saying that, if only he had heeded their words, he would not have brought such destruction on himself and them, his faithful wives. Fate had blinded his eyes and

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stopped his ears and so the dreadful curse of widowhood fell on them.

"Did I not beg you a thousand times, O my husband," cried Mandodari, "when I heard of the fall of Khara and Dhooshana not to pursue the quarrel with that extraordinary Prince of Ayodhya, but to make peace with him? I could never understand the fatal fascination which that woman Sita had for you. Her sorrow has been the ruin of us all. Hereafter she will be happy with her husband and we have to be poor forlorn widows sunk in misery. Oh, I never expected this would be my end, I who ever prided myself on being the daughter of the King of the Danavas and the wife of the dreaded King of the Rakshasas and the mother of a beloved son who conquered the king of the gods. Oh, it is too dreadful! Bitter are the fruits of sin. O my husband, once you conquered your senses and made *tapas* and obtained illimitable power in all the worlds. But later the senses seem to have taken revenge on you and conquered you and brought you to this pass. You are lying dead here—one of a thousand slain in battle—and I, the Chief Queen of Lanka, who used to step out of my palace only in our aerial car Pushpaka, have come here on foot unveiled like a peasant woman. O my beloved, why don't you chide me for coming like this? Why

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are you silent? Why don't you reply to me? Where have you gone and why have you not taken me with you?"

The poor queen embraced her husband's corpse and wailed long. It was a heart-rending sight. Her sisters in sorrow tried to console her and separate her from the corpse. But she would not be consoled. She wept long and piteously. Her tears had moistened her clothes and yet they fell fast on her breast. It was only when Vibhishana came with the priests to perform the rites of cremation that the queen desisted and sat on the ground leaning against the other wives of Ravana, a sad and silent witness to the elaborate ritual. After the ceremonies were over, Vibhishana persuaded the royal ladies to go back to Lanka and himself returned to the prince's camp.

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CHAPTER XLVIII

AFTER the death of Ravana, Rama expressed his profound gratitude to Matali and gave him leave to take back his chariot to the king of the gods and returned to his camp along with Lakshmana and the Vanara chiefs. And when Vibhishana joined them after performing his brother's obsequies, the prince ordered Lakshmana to install him formally on the throne of Lanka. Accordingly sea-water was brought in a golden vessel and Lakshmana proceeded to Lanka accompanied by Vibhishana, Sugriva and others. There in the capital of Ravana, in the presence of the Rakshasas who were friendly to Vibhishana, he duly sprinkled the water on his head and installed him as the King of Lanka. The citizens accepted Vibhishana as their king and offered him flowers and fruits and other gifts in token of their acceptance. Thus the promise which the prince had made to Vibhishana on the day on which the latter arrived at his camp on the mainland was fulfilled to the very letter. After the installation, Rama asked Hanuman to go to the Asoka grove with Vibhishana's permission and inform Sita of his victory and of the death of Ravana and bring back her message. Hanuman gladly went and conveyed to the princess the happy news and said:—

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"Now that Vibhishana, our ally, is the King of Lanka, think, O Princess, that you are no longer in an alien land, but in your own home. Vibhishana himself will come to you in a short time and pay his respects to you."

Sita was so overjoyed on hearing the news of her husband's victory that she could not say a word in reply to Hanuman. After some time, with considerable effort, she said, "I am too happy, O Vanara, to speak. What words can I find to thank you adequately for the good news you have brought to me? And what gifts can I offer you for the kind words you have said?"

"This reply of yours, O Princess," said Hanuman respectfully, joining his palms and bowing before her, "is more precious to me than any gift of gold or diamonds. It is more to me than even heaven. None but you could have spoken like this."

"And none but you could have brought such happy news to me, O Vanara," said Sita smiling. "In you I see a combination of many noble traits—strength, valour, wisdom, firmness, patience, humility and courage."

Hanuman was overwhelmed with joy at the compliment paid to him and requested her to give him permission to deal with the Rakshasi guards who had been terrorizing her so long.

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"With my hands and feet, with my nails and teeth I should like to repay these beasts the debt we owe to them," said Hanuman.

"Not so, O Vanara," replied the princess without hesitation. "They were only the servants of Ravana and had to do his bidding. Now that he is dead, they can do me no harm. No, no, they are not to blame. I have suffered for my own sins. One cannot escape the results of one's past actions. And even if these women have of their own accord done me wrong, it is our duty to forgive them and not retaliate. Noble it is, O Vanara, always to do good for evil. For there is none in the world who does not err some time or other."

"O noble lady! Worthy wife of a worthy Prince!" exclaimed Hanuman. "Noble and worthy beyond praise is the sentiment you have expressed. I bow to you in reverence. Now give me leave to go. What message shall I carry to your lord?"

"Tell my husband that I want to see him"—that was the simple message that the princess gave in reply.

"Undoubtedly you will see him, O noble Princess, as the Queen of Heaven sees the King of the Gods when he returns in triumph over the evil ones," said Hanuman and took leave of her.

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When Hanuman returned to the prince and delivered the simple message of the princess that she wanted to see her victorious husband, the prince, to the surprise of all who were by him at the time, looked down and became thoughtful and his eyes were filled with tears. After some time he raised his head and with a deep sigh asked Vibhishana to conduct Sita to him after she had robed herself in a befitting manner. Accordingly Vibhishana went to the Asoka grove, and, as he had not spoken to the princess before,communicated Rama's instructions to her through the ladies of his household. The princess then, directly addressing Vibhishana, replied, "I want to see my husband, as I am, O King of the Rakshasas."

"Not so, if you please, O Princess," advised Vibhishana. "You will do well, I think, to follow the instructions of your lord and husband."

"All right, then," she said and rose to obey the instructions.

When she was ready, having bathed and put on her silks and ornaments, Vibhishana conducted her to a richly decorated palanquin and requested her to mount it. She consented and, like the royal lady that she was, was borne on the shoulders of six stalwart Rakshasas. When they reached the camp, Vibhishana went in advance and told the

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prince that the princess was arriving. The prince received the news with mingled feelings of joy grief and anger and asked the bewildered Vibhishana to bring her to him. Vibhishana then ordered his servants to keep back the crowd and make a clear passage for the royal lady. Then liveried servants with long canes in their hands began to push and beat the crowd of Vanaras and Rakshasas who had assembled there eager to see the princess, arriving in regal state. When Rama saw this, he grew angry and cried, "Don't prevent them. They are all my men and they should not be harassed in this way. It is not houses, nor high walls, nor deep veils, nor thick purdhas that guard the chastity of women. It is their own virtue that maintains their honour. So bring her here openly into this company of my friends."

The prince's manner was more and more mystifying. His looks, his tone and his whole bearing puzzled Lakshmana, Sugriva, Hanuman and others. They were seized with a vague fear. Instead of a happy meeting which they had expected after all the sufferings that the prince and princess had both undergone, all of them seemed to be heading towards the verge of a precipice. They began to ask themselves, "What

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does the Prince mean by all this strange behaviour? Has he lost all love for the Princess? Why are his eyes so red? Is it anger or sorrow? With whom is he angry? His enemy is dead. Why is he sorrowful? The Princess has been saved and his object is fulfilled." Even Lakshmana could not understand the situation. The suspense was painful to all.

Meanwhile Vibhishana conducted the princess fully robed and deeply veiled like a royal bride. Shrinking within herself, as she walked through the narrow lane lined on either side by the soldiers of both armies, she came and stood before the prince. She raised her eyes and, crying in a low tone, "My husband," burst into tears and could not proceed further. It was a tense moment. Everybody in that vast crowd was in tears—everybody except the prince who, knitting his brows and looking coldly on the ground, said with painful deliberation:—

"I have conquered my foe, good lady, and set you free. My object has been fulfilled. By my valour and the help of my friends here I have avenged the wrong done to me and removed the stain on the honour of my family. You are now free to go anywhere. How could I take you back? The Rakshasa has looked on you with lustful eyes,

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seized you by the hand and kept you in his house for many months. Who knows what else has happened? Who knows what other indignities you have suffered? Thus there would be a suspicion in people's minds of a stain on your purity. And the wife of an Ikshvaku prince must be above suspicion of any kind. Therefore I am afraid we must part. I say this deliberately and after long consideration."

Sita wept to hear these cruel words of her husband. Was it for this that she had lived through all the agony of her captivity? What had become of all her husband's love for her? He had never said a single harsh word to her before? And how unjust was his suspicion! They had lived so long together in cities and palaces, in forests and huts, and did he not know the purity of her heart? And he had spoken these words in the presence of all these hosts. Sorrow, shame, humiliation and anger contended with one another in her heart. She remained speechless for some time after her husband had spoken. There was an intense and painful silence in that assembly. Lakshmana, Hanuman, Sugriva and others were stunned. On looking at the face of Rama, they were too afraid to speak or even whisper to one another. What would the princess do now? How

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was this terrible scene going to end? These were the thoughts that passed through the minds of the on-lookers.

They had not to wait long. For the princess slowly wiped her eyes and with great effort began to speak. She said:—

"Why do you, O valiant hero, speak these harsh and unbecoming words to me, as a common man does to a vulgar woman? Upon my honour, I declare I am not what you seem to think I am. Do not judge the whole of our sex by the conduct of a few. You know me and you should not have entertained any suspicion in your mind. It is true that the Rakshasa cast his eyes lustfully on me, seized me by the hand and kept me a prisoner in his palace. But how could I help it? It was not my fault that the monster carried me off by force. He could only touch my body. He could not touch my mind. He could only imprison this frame of flesh, he could not imprison my soul. All the time, my mind, my heart and my soul were fixed on you and you alone, my husband. If after living so long together you do not know my heart, I am truly undone. When you sent Hanuman over the sea to Lanka, if only you had made known to me your mind, I would have given up my life then and there and spared you all this trouble of building a bridge and this risk of

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waging a terrible war. In suspecting a stain on my honour you have not considered, O wise Prince, my immaculate birth and my stainless history."

Having made this reply to her husband, she turned to Lakshmana, who was standing by like a picture of misery, and said, with tears streaming from her eyes and with a catch in her voice, "Prepare for me a pyre, O son of Sumitra. That is the only remedy for this sorrow of mine. Suspected thus most falsely, I do not care to live hereafter."

Lakshmana looked at his brother and, seeing no indication of any prohibition in his face, began the melancholy work of preparing a pyre. When the pyre was ready and it was set ablaze, Sita reverently went round her husband like a dutiful wife and, having bowed to him, approached the blazing fire. Joining her palms in salutation, she said, "If my mind has never strayed from my husband, O god of fire, the witness of all the world, protect me! If I, who am unjustly suspected, am really pure and unstained, O god of fire, the witness of all the world, protect me! If the sun and the moon, the day and the night, the wind and the quarters of heaven and all the gods in heaven know me to be pure in heart, O god of fire, the witness of all the world, protect me!"

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With these words she fearlessly plunged into the blazing fire, to the astonishment and horror of the Vanaras and the Rakshasas, who on all sides cried, "Ah! Ah!", while Rama sat weeping silently. Then arose from out of the flames the god whom she had invoked. Scattering the burning faggots the god of fire stepped out with Sita in front of him. Not a hair on her head had been injured, not a flower in her garland had faded and not a thread in her robe of silk had shrivelled. Fresh as the dawning day, the princess shone with her ornaments of burnished gold and her robes of crimson silk. Pure and radiant, she appeared younger and lovelier than before. The god of fire conducted her to the prince and said, "Here is your wife, O Rama. I assure you she knows no sin. Neither by word of mouth, nor glance of eye, nor impulse of heart has she ever strayed from her spotless purity. She has passed through untold sufferings, both of body and of mind, and yet her devotion to you was never shaken. Sinless and pure of heart is she. Accept her without any hesitation."

"Don't I know that she is spotless and pure of heart?" cried Rama, standing up to receive her. "Don't I know the measure of her love and devotion to me? How could the daughter of holy Janaka be other than pure, other than chaste and other than

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devoted? It is for the sake of the world that I have made her go through this ordeal of fire, so that the truth might be known to all. If I had taken her back without this test, people would have said that I attached no importance to purity, but was only moved by blind love. Now no one can cast any aspersion on her or me. Our reunion will be blessed by all. But, as a matter of fact, she and I are ever one. She cannot be parted from me in spirit any more than sunlight from the sun."

All were supremely happy at the reunion of the prince and the princess. There was rejoicing not only on earth but also in heaven. The gods came down and showered their blessings on them, and so did the ancestral spirits of the Ikshvaku race. And after the immortals had departed, the tired mortals went to rest.

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CHAPTER XLIX

THE next morning Vibhishana came to the prince and requested him to make himself happy in Lanka and receive the presents which he would gratefully bestow on him.

"Make my friends, the Vanaras, happy and bestow your presents on them," replied Rama. "As, for me, my period of banishment has come to a close and I am anxious to see my brother Bharata. I want to start for Ayodhya to-day. I am grateful to you indeed for all the help you have rendered me"

"I can take you to Ayodhya in a day, O Prince." rejoined Vibhishana. "There is my brother's famous aerial car Pushpaka which he got from Kubera. It can accommodate any number and can travel in the air at any speed you wish. I will place it at your disposal for returning home."

The prince accepted the offer gratefully and started that very day with Sita and Lakshmana. Before starting, he went to take leave of all his friends. But he was agreeably surprised when they all expressed their desire to go with him to Ayodhya and pay their respects to Bharata and the queen-mothers. Rama gladly consented and took all of them in the car. The princess bashfully sat by the side of her husband and the Vanaras

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together with Vibhishana and his followers arranged themselves in various places in the car and they soon left Lanka behind. As they travelled in the air, straight as a bird flies, Rama showed to Sita all places of interest below connected with their adventures.

"Here is the battle-field, O Sita. You see it is still wet with the blood of the innumerable Rakshasas who perished in the war....Here is the place where Ravana fell....Here is the spot where, Kumbhakarna was killed....And here is the place where Lakshmana vanquished Indrajit after a bitter fight....Look at this sea-coast, O fair one. It was here that we camped the first night after reaching Lanka....It was here probably that Mainaka rose above the waters of the sea to give a resting place to Hanuman in his first flight....Look at the bridge-head that Nila built with the help of the sea-god and all the Vanaras....This is the place where I worshipped the great God Mahadeva before I gave orders for the bridge. This shall be a place of pilgrimage for thousands of generations hereafter. ....It is here that Vibhishana came through the air and sought my protection....There, O Sita, is Kishkindha, the capital of Sugriva. See how thick the forest is around it."

At this point the princess, interrupted him and said, "I should like, O Prince, to take with me to

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Ayodhya Tara and the other Vanara ladies, the wives of our friends here." "So be it," said the prince and told Sugriva to go to his capital and bring all the ladies of his household and the wives of the other Vanara chiefs. The King of the Vanaras went and brought them as quickly as he could. They gladly came decked in all the primitive jewellery of their land and were taken up into the car. When they saw the princess, they were so struck with awe at her beauty, elegance, dignity and charm that they could hardly find words to thank her for her courtesy. They huddled themselves in one corner of the car and talked in whispers to one another.

Meanwhile the car moved on. It flew over the Rishyamuka mountain, where Ram had spent the most unhappy period of his life.

"Here is that lofty mountain Rishyamuka," continued Rama, "and there at the foot of it is that beautiful lake Pampa, where I felt most miserable without you, O Sita.....Here, not far from the lake we have left behind, is the hermitage of Sabari, who entertained me with a great variety of wild fruits she had kept in store.....Here is the place, I think, where we killed that monster Kabandha who had extraordinarily long arms and a hideous trunk.....See here is the tree, O Janaki, where

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Ravana fought with Jatayu and killed him..... And here is our hut in Janasthana, my dear, still standing. You remember that clearing in the forest where I fought against the armies of Khara and Dhooshana single-handed, while you and Lakshmana watched the fight from the cave overlooking our hermitage.....See, O Maithili, how the Godavari is flowing to-day as it flowed on the day on which I missed you and went about searching for your body in the waters..... Here, I think, is the hermitage of Sutikshna and there a little to the north is that of Sarabhanga .....Is it not here that I slew the giant Viradha who tried to carry you off?.....Oh, don't you recognise, O Vaidehi, the hermitage of the holy sage Atri and his venerable wife Anasuya, who treated you very kindly as her own daughter?.... There, right below us, is that lovely place, Chitrakuta, where we were so happy. You remember the day on which Bharata came with a large army to induce me to go back to Ayodhya.....Look at the river Yamuna here flowing with its dark waters through that thick forest.....Here lies the holy hermitage of Bharadwaja. I will make the car stop here. And there, in the horizon, you see the sacred river Ganges and the place where Guha came to see us, and a little beyond are the Sarayu and our city

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Ayodhya. Bow down to my father's capital, O Princess, now that we have come back safe from our exile."

When the Vanaras and the Rakshasas heard these words of the prince, they all rose to their feet and peered into the horizon to catch a glimpse of the famous city. The prince ordered that they should all get down and pay their respects to the sage Bharadwaja, and from his hermitage send word to Bharata of their arrival. It was exactly fourteen years ago that Rama left Ayodhya to make his father keep his promise to Kaikeyi. He had now fulfilled his vow. Bharadwaja was glad to see him again and told him that all was well at Ayodhya. The sage. with his mystic vision, had been following the fortunes of Rama ever since he left him fourteen years ago and was well acquainted with the adventures, the sufferings and the victories of the royal exiles. He congratulated the prince on his happy return and entertained the whole party for a day. Rama now sent Hanuman to Ayodhya to apprise Bharata of his arrival, along with Sita and Lakshmana, so that he might be prepared to meet his brothers.

"You might tell him, O good Hanuman," said he, "what you know of our history during these fourteen years. And, as you tell him of all these

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events and of our return, please watch his face and see how he takes my coming back. For, however righteous a man may be, it will be difficult for him to relinquish a position of power. If my brother Bharata shows by any indication in his face that he would rather continue to rule, I will allow him to do so with all my heart and gladly retire. So please come back and tell me before we start what the inclinations of my brother are."

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CHAPTER L

HANUMAN flew at once from the hermitage of Bharadwaja, stopped for a few moments at Sringiberapura to inform Guha of the arrival of Rama and reached Nandigrama, a village on the outskirts of Ayodhya, where Bharata was leading the life of an ascetic and holding the reins of government as the deputy of Rama. Bharata was surrounded by his ministers and courtiers, all leading an ascetic life like their master. Hanuman rushed into their presence and announced the happy news of the home-coming of Rama, accompanied by Sita and Lakshmana. Bharata was too weak and feeble to bear the joy caused by this sudden announcement and fainted away. After some time he came to himself, and, recollecting what Hanuman had told him, embraced him with tears streaming from his eyes and said, "Are you, sir, a man or a god, who have come to me with such happy news? You deserve a present of innumerable villages, cows and slaves. Blessed is this day on which at last I hear of the home-coming of my dear brother. They say that, however miserable a man may be, if only he lives long, he is sure to have an experience of joy. This has come true in my case. To-day my long-drawn suffering is at an end. Come, sir, sit down and tell me who you are and how my

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brother has spent all these years of exile in the forest."

Hanuman sat down and narrated briefly to Bharata and his court the entrancing story of Rama's life from the time when Bharata took leave of him at Chitrakuta to the time of his return to Bharadwaja's hermitage. "He will be resting in the hermitage to-night, O Bharata," concluded Hanuman, "and will be here to-morrow morning."

"And to-morrow is the fifth day of the month of Chaitra," exclaimed Bharata. "How wonderful! Exactly fourteen years ago on the fifth of Chaitra did my brother leave Ayodhya amidst the tears and lamentations of his people, and to-morrow on the same day of the same month he will return to his capital amidst universal rejoicings."

Immediately Bharata gave orders that the whole city be decorated and made ready for the reception of Rama and Sita and put his brother Satrughna in charge of the arrangements. Satrughna worked without a moment's rest, summoned ten thousand labourers in an hour and instructed them that, before sunrise the next morning, the road from Nandigrama to Ayodhya should be repaired, widened and watered, that all the streets in Ayodhya should be swept, watered and strewn with flowers, that the houses on the main road to the palace of Dasaratha

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should be whitewashed and that flags should be hoisted on all big buildings.

The news of Rama's arrival spread like wild fire throughout the city and all the citizens were overjoyed and ran hither and thither telling others, embracing one another and shedding tears of joy. In fact, no one slept that night in Ayodhya. All were impatiently waiting for the dawn which would bring their beloved prince back to his capital. They spent the long and weary hours of the night in speaking about the events that had happened fourteen years ago—Dasaratha's resolve to crown Rama, the consequent rejoicings in the city, Kaikeyi's dramatic obstruction, the prince's self-imposed banishment, the painful scenes in the court, the sorrow and lamentation of the people, the running of Dasaratha and Kausalya after the chariot of Rama, Dasaratha's death, the return of Bharata from his uncle's house, his resolve not to accept the throne, his journey to Chitrakuta and his return with the sandals of Rama on his head. The citizens were never tired of praising the countless virtues of Rama, the beauty and charm of Sita, the high-mindedness of Bharata and the love and loyalty of Lakshmana. Boys and girls who had not been born when those events happened and to whom the names of Rama and Sita were only sacred names to be

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uttered in awe and reverence were on the tiptoe of expectation the whole night. And old men and women who had followed the chariot of Rama fourteen years ago with tears in their eyes and subsequently accompanied Bharata to Chitrakuta to induce the prince to return, thanked God that they were still alive to witness his return.

On the morrow, long before the day dawned, people began to assemble in their thousands at Nandigrama, where Rama was expected to arrive and meet Bharata. The members of the royal household, ministers, courtiers, learned Brahmanas, warriors, merchants, common people—men and women, boys and girls—marched to the place in their best attire during the early hours of the morning twilight. The ministers went riding on their elephants. The ladies of the royal family and the queen-mothers went in their palanquins borne by liveried men. The wealthy courtiers went in their chariots drawn by horses. Thousands of common citizens started very early while it was still dark and went on foot. And several companies of armed men, some on horseback and some on foot, led by their commanders, went last.

The vast crowd was arranged according to Satrughna's instructions into a procession, each group being stationed in its appropriate place. The

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procession was headed by Bharata and the ministers. The ministers carried in their hands the various insignia of royalty—two golden wands, two white chamaras and a white silk umbrella. Bharata bore on his head the sandals of Rama which he had brought from Chitrakuta. All stood in their places straining their eyes to see if the prince and his party were arriving. They stood for hours, but Rama did not arrive. Bharata grew impatient and said to Hanuman who was standing behind him, "Where is my brother, O Vanara? You said he would arrive here early in the morning. The sun has risen and there is no sign of Rama coming. Is it all true, what you have said, O Vanara, or have you been playing a practical joke on us?"

"The delay must be due to my Vanara friends, O Prince," replied Hanuman "The hermitage of Bharadwaja is full of fruit-bearing trees, and so is a considerable part of the way from there to this place. Probably my friends are enjoying themselves, and the kind and generous Prince is allowing them to indulge in their whims. But I see a cloud of dust in the horizon and hear a confused noise in the distance. We Vanaras can see much farther than you. I am sure they are coming. Just look at that reddish cloud over those trees. I think it is due to the marching of the

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Vanaras on the ground and raising a cloud of dust, while the Prince and Princess are flying hither overhead in their aerial car. I think they must now be crossing that stream which you call the Gomati. And I see the tops of trees on this side of the river shaking. It can't be due to the wind. It must be due to the Vanaras.... There! the car is coming. Look at that white object growing bigger on the horizon due south, as my finger points. It is coming with great speed to make up for lost time."

In a few minutes Bharata and the assembled people were able to see the white object that Hanuman was pointing to and gazed on it with wonder, as it came out of the clouds like the full moon. Gradually it came over their heads and began to descend slowly. When the people saw distinctly the images of the swans that bore the Pushpaka, they raised tumultuous shouts of joy crying, "He is come", and lifted their joined palms in salutation as to the high gods descending from heaven. At last the car came down and touched the ground. Bharata at once went in and prostrated himself before his brother. The latter with tears in his eyes took him in his lap, embraced him and kissed him on the head. Bharata, soon disentangling himself, greeted Lakshmana and bowed at the feet of Sita. Then he welcomed all

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the Vanara chiefs and said to Sugriva, "We have been four brothers, but with you we have now become five." And he turned to Vibhishana and said, "It is our good fortune that you have become a friend and helped us in this great enterprise." Bharata was followed by Satrughna, who now came forward and reverently touched the feet of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana.

By this time the queen-mothers, Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi and others came into the car. On seeing his mother, Rama at once rose and prostrated himself before her and touched her feet with his forehead. He similarly greeted Sumitra and Kaikeyi. And Lakshmana also did the same. Rama then went to his family priest, the sage Vasishtha, and reverently touched his feet. The people now crowded round the car with customary salutations crying aloud, "Welcome to you, O Prince, the son of blessed Kausalya."

After the greetings were over, Bharata took the sandals of Rama which had been occupying the throne all these fourteen years and fitted them again to Rama's feet and said, "I have been holding your kingdom on trust, O my brother, all these years. You have come. My responsibility is now over. The object of my life has been fulfilled. You will find that your treasury, your granaries and

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your armies have grown tenfold during your absence."

The Vanaras and the Rakshasas were moved to tears when they witnessed such love and loyalty on the part of Bharata to his elder brother. Rama once more took his brother in his lap and affectionately embraced him. Then the happy reunited brothers went in the car to Nandigrama, the residence of Bharata.

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CHAPTER LI

BHARATA now once more pressed Rama to relieve him of the responsibility of ruling the kingdom.

"Just as a tender calf cannot bear the yoke," he said, "which a lordly bull alone can bear, I cannot rule this kingdom as efficiently as you can. An ass cannot gallop like a horse, nor can a crow fly like a swan. So I beg of you, my brother, to accept the crown of Kosala and rule over us your subjects, as you alone can."

Rama consented, and at once preparations were set on foot for his coronation. The brothers doffed their ascetic garb, set free their matted locks and put on the costume of princes. The queen-mothers affectionately attended upon their daughter-in-law Sita and saw that she wore the rich dress and the ornaments befitting a princess. The Vanara chiefs and their wives were also helped to get ready for the occasion. The ministers of State and the priests went in advance to Ayodhya. Sita was anxious to show the Vanara ladies all that was worth seeing in Ayodhya. And when all were ready, Rama got into the decorated chariot brought by old Sumantra from Ayodhya. Bharata took the reins, Satrughna bore the royal umbrella, Lakshmana and Vibhishana waved the chamara and Sugriva and the other

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Vanara chiefs rode on elephants and came behind. Thus the royal procession marched slowly from Nandigrama to the accompaniment of the peal of trumpets and conch-shells and the sound of joyous bells and the music of various instruments. It passed through the main streets of Ayodhya, which were lined throughout with enthusiastic and cheering crowds, and reached at last the palace of Dasaratha.

On the morrow the old Vasishtha made Rama and Sita sit on the jewelled throne of the Ikshvakus and, along with many learned Brahmanas, who chanted the Vedas, sprinkled on their heads the holy waters brought overnight by Hanuman and others from a thousand sacred streams. After Vasishtha and the other Brahmanas, the ceremony of purification was repeated by the select virgins, ministers, warriors and citizens of Ayodhya. Vasishtha then placed the ancient jewelled crown of the Ikshvaku kings on Rama's head and the other priests adorned his person with many traditional ornaments. While these ceremonies were taking place, Satrughna held the white royal umbrella over the throne, and Vibhishana, the King of Lanka, and Sugriva, the King of Kishkindha, on either side waved two white chamaras. The gods on high showered their choicest gifts on

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Rama, while the Gandharvas sang and the Apsaras danced. The earth rejoiced yielding rich crops and the trees responded with sweet-smelling flowers and fruits.

On this auspicious occasion Rama gave away thousands of cows and horses, gold and diamonds, pearls and precious stones to the priests, friends, and dependants, who had assembled in large numbers in the hall to witness the ceremony. He presented a splendid necklace of pearls set with diamonds to Sita, now the Queen of Kosala. Wearing the precious jewel for a moment, the Queen took it off her neck and glanced at the Vanaras and then at her husband. Rama understood her intention and said, "Give the necklace, if you please, O my beloved, to him with whose strength, valour and wisdom you are most pleased." Sita then graciously bestowed in on Hanuman, who bowed and received the precious gift amidst universal applause.

After the coronation was over, the Vanaras and the Rakshasas who had all been loaded with presents took leave of the King and the Queen and went to their respective countries. The first act of Rama when he became King was to raise one of his brothers to the dignity of an associate ruler. He first offered the place to Lakshmana,

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who had served him so faithfully during the fourteen years of his exile. But Lakshmana would not hear of it. He chose to be the simple attendent that he had been. So Bharata was forced to accept the place and was installed accordingly.

The King and the Queen were supremely happy and ruled the kingdom for a very long time. They performed many sacrifices for the good of their subjects. During their long reign there were timely rains, the crops never failed and famine was unknown in the land. There was never any fear of thieves, robbers or wild beasts anywhere. All the people in the kingdom were well-fed, well-clothed and well-protected. All persons lived to ripe old age. There were no early deaths, no calamities of any kind and no cases of long widowhood. All sections of the people performed their duties cheerfully. There was never any hatred or ill-will or any thought of violence among them. The names of their King and Queen were ever on their lips. Every man's ambition was to be, like Rama, truthful, just, pious, generous and brave; and every woman's ambition was to be like Sita, pure, faithful, tender and resolute. In fact, the long and prosperous reign of Rama and Sita was a Golden Age, the like of which is unknown in the annals of men.

THE END

Peace be to all Beings

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